

**Information Trolls vs. Democracy: An examination of
fake news content delivered during the 2019
Canadian Federal election and the generation of
information warfare**

**by
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Abstract

This research explores the role of fake news delivered during the 2019 Canadian Federal election. The aim of this study is to understand what impact exposure to fake news may have had on voter's political ideologies and to examine whether criminal interference was involved. This study employs a survey which was delivered through social media platforms to Canadian voters in hopes to understand whether they were exposed to fake news, if it affected their ultimate voting decision, if they were the recipient of an election-related robocall, and what the nature of the robocall was. The results of four binary logistic regressions using survey data (N = 190) are used to explain how fake news can impact voter's decisions. Further, this study also employs a qualitative content analysis of known fake news headlines (N = 596) during the time of the election to determine the aim, scope, target, and nature of each news piece. A final qualitative content analysis is conducted to determine the nature of robocalls through survey respondents who were the recipient of an election-related robocall (N = 46). The findings of these studies allow for an in-depth examination into whether Canadian voters were influenced by fake news, if the influence that had an impact on their voting decision, and if criminal interference was involved during the time of the election.

Keywords: fake news; misinformation; disinformation; foreign interference; information warfare

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Glossary

Comment	In the context of social media engagement, this relates to the action of providing a comment on a post
Like	In the context of social media engagement, this relates to clicking the 'like' icon which expresses the user's interest in the post
Meme	An amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media.
Newsfeed	In opening a social media platform, the first page of the program's interface provides the user with a current selection of content which is updated frequently.
Share	In the context of social media engagement, this involves a user re-posting a social media post, image, or video to their personal page
Sub-Reddit	On Reddit, the users have the option to subscribe to various sub-Reddits. These are best described as sub-groups on Reddit where the content posted within them is related to a specific theme.
Tweet	On Twitter, tweets are posts which are created by a person and posted to their Twitter page. Re-Tweeting involves sharing the post from another person's Twitter page to the user's own page.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Social media platforms have become an increasingly embedded and useful tools utilized by many individuals, groups, businesses, agencies and political parties to circulate information delivery. Through social media, we are able to connect with friends and family, stay up to date on the latest products and gadgets, engage in conversation with others, and maintain an updated knowledge on local, national, and global events. This evolving technology has the ability to connect people through rapid dissemination of information. Previous communication tools are still commonly used, but they cannot compete with the streamlined capabilities that social media platforms possess in the distribution of information. Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and Tumblr are a few of the many platforms utilized to share and distribute news, photos, and videos. These platforms can be beneficial to bridge the geographical gaps that can hinder social cohesion; yet, it is the very same technology that can be accessory to social divisiveness. The nature of the content that is being shared and circulated can have significant consequences for the people who consume the material.

The main focus of this research is to understand what impact exposure to fake news during the 2019 Canadian Federal election may have had on voter's political ideologies and to examine whether criminal interference was involved. Following the election, there were a variety of reports surfacing about automated phone calls (robocalls) being delivered to Canadian voters informing them to vote the day after polls have closed. Through employing an exploratory design, this research also seeks to understand the nature of these calls and whether evidence can be found to support the existence of voter suppression strategies during the pre-election period. Significant research was developed following the 2016 U.S Presidential election. Findings of these research endeavors examining the false information dispersed during the pre-election period in the U.S found that false information was deliberately circulated to serve an intended purpose (Berghel, 2017). As evidence has provided insight into the interference of falsified information during the U.S election, it is worthwhile to understand whether Canada has too fallen victim to informational violence.

To collect information that may be useful in answering the main research questions, this thesis employs three separate studies. Study 1 quantitatively examines the data derived from the survey which was created for the research to understand the experiences of Canadians who have come across fake news items during the pre-election period. Study 2 qualitatively assesses the content authored and posted by two main sources, *The Buffalo Chronicle* and the Canada Proud Facebook group, to determine whether the sources hold any responsibility in the production or dispersion of fake news content. Study 3 examines the qualitative data collected from survey participants who share their experiences with answering election-related automated telephone calls (robocalls). Through analyzing their responses, this thesis aims to understand the nature of the robocalls received by Canadian citizens and whether political interference was a factor.

Through conducting three studies and analyzing their results, this thesis hopes that the findings of each study can be used in collaboration to explain the nature and scope of fake news, the techniques and mechanisms used to create and deploy false information pieces, to understand how disinformation may influence a reader, and whether any of the actions involved in the distribution of false information crosses the border into criminal activity. This research further examines information warfare and whether the false information delivered during the 2019 Canadian Federal election was impacted by an information attack on the Canadian democratic process.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

As media consumers engage with an endless stream of information, the ability to infer the accuracy, quality, and legitimacy of the messages delivered to them can become more burdensome. Social media platforms occupy a unique role due the constant presentation of social engagement materials delivered to the user. As the users become overloaded with information, the risk of accepting false information as real becomes higher. There is a level of dangerousness posed when false information is accepted as factual by the consumer and is then used to guide their political decisions. Social media has become a tool used by many to find and access important information related to democratic elections. The evolving reliance on social networks has led to the conception of 'cyber-ghettos' which are conceived in a realm of social media where fake news content fills the void when reliable news content is inaccessible or unavailable (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). Cyber-ghettos exist when sectors of cyber space serve as an echo chamber where information, views, and opinions are propagated amongst those who hold similar ideologies. This results in limited access and exposure to alternative perspectives (Kumar & Krishna, 2014).

To better situate this research, it is important to engage with relevant literature that examines the implications of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda and how fake news fits within this discourse. This thesis next examines fake news through the lens of social constructionism. Social construction theory proves valuable as a framework to interpret the role of claims makers in the production of fictitious knowledge. Claims makers are entities or individuals who hold significant authority through their ability to generate social knowledge. Through the construction and injection of information into the public domain, their role is to provide information to the masses; however, when the information established by claims makers is inherently flawed, the consequences for information consumers can be catastrophic. This review also considers the ability of false fact claims makers to facilitate information warfare (Libicki, 2007). To appraise the criminality associated with intentionally disseminating false

information related to election issues, this thesis will explore relevant Canadian cases and legislation to interpret the Canadian legal perspective on election-focused fake news.

2.2. Misinformation and Disinformation: Propaganda and Fake News

While they are not synonymous terms, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and fake news. all share very similar attributes; however, it is their differences that distinctly define them. Misinformation is considered to be information that is introduced as accurate information, but it is later discovered as being inaccurate; disinformation is deceptive and untrue information which is purposefully distributed as propaganda (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, Oberauer, & Krueger, 2013). Propaganda can be best understood as politically motivated information materials which are typically biased or misleading (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). Disinformation, like misinformation, can later be recognize as false, but the propensity for harm caused by the dissemination of disinformation before it is deciphered as false can be significant.

Fake news has become a signifier that is associated with the rising concerns over the erosion of journalistic integrity, the amplification of biased voices, and the role social media plays in information dissemination (Carlson, 2018). It is typically propagandist in nature; but not exclusively so. One conclusive definition for fake news is that it is conceptualized as “distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). This definition can be applied to all types of information pieces. Memes, GIFs, news articles (printed and online), videos, shared posts, tweets, forum posts, editorial pieces, and so forth can all potentially propagate signals which are at odds with authentic reality. Allcott and Gentzkow’s (2017) definition serves a valuable framework to analyze the concept of fake news. The distorted signals imply that the information relayed through the signal have become misreported, misrepresented, skewed, and/or twisted. This signifies that fake news can fall within or between the distinction of misinformation and disinformation. Fake news can be classified misinformation when it is unintentionally inaccurate (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). A piece could be published that may not have any malicious intent to deceive the reader, but the information presented is still inherently false. Fake news can also be classified as disinformation when it is purposefully circulated to mislead the intended audience

(Lewandowsky et al., 2013). While both types of fake news can present significantly negative consequence, disinformation is likely to be the more dangerous sub-type.

Fake news is created and disseminated for many reasons. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) discuss three rationales that seek to explain the spread of fake news. A considerable factor in the creation and publication of fake news media is that it is significantly cheaper to generate and deploy in comparison to more ethically bound information sources. Further, many consumers may not have the means or devotion to deduce the accuracy of each piece of news-related information they are exposed to. This can allow falsified information to flourish in an environment where readers may be less inclined to scrutinize the facts presented. Next, many consumers may simply appreciate partisan information. Social media platforms can generate an echo chamber around an individual where information, views, opinions, and ideologies are reiterated and rebounded within the user's informational space which limits their exposure to other possible ideas (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). Users become impoverished to other perspectives which further perpetuates their current view as being the superlative outlook where other possible ideas are inferior. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and Kumar and Krishna (2014) both discuss why fake news has rooted itself in the news media landscape; the consequences of its foothold in the dissemination of false and biased information is that it can hinder a reader's ability to receive and consider supplementary counter-perspectives.

Bakir and McStay (2018) discuss the dangers of echo chambers. The authors note that a key tenant of functional democracy is that the citizens must be well-informed in order to make democratic decisions. An ill-informed citizen who is guided by fake news may vote differently in elections as their inspiration is directed by unreliable facts. Citizens form their decisions about key social and democratic issues through the information they interact with. Far-reaching deceptive facts delivered through fake news can significantly impact democratic outcomes. Echo chambers then serve as a silo where incorrect information is further propagated and circulated, but not corrected. This causes the ill-informed citizen to remain in the dark as their view based on dubious facts remain unrevised. A key tool necessary in the creation of echo chambers, as noted by Bakir and McStay (2018), are the algorithms applied to online networks. Algorithms are applied to newsfeeds and they selectively determine, based on the data inputted into the algorithm, what kind of content a user is likely inclined to appreciate viewing. Algorithms

consider the information that is available about the user which can include their friends and followers, their browsing history, purchases that they have made, and the types of content they typically post and engage with. Algorithms can increase the possibility of confirmation bias as they further re-circulate the same views that the user appears to favour without providing other potential perspectives or counter information (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Fake news often contains highly affective material which is intentionally crafted to inspire an emotional reaction from the reader (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The use of emotionally charged words within the fictitious news item are typically strategically placed to enable the story to linger within the minds of the readers long after they are exposed to it. Even if they are aware that the information is false, the affective response can still affect their emotions about a certain topic. Bakir and McStay (2018) further note that through manipulating people's emotions in targeted material which intends to diminish the appeal of political candidates, this can encourage increased dislike for specific figures of authority. This may have a considerable result in reducing the public's confidence in the legitimacy of the government and can ultimately lead to disproportionate democratic decisions. It is clear through the examined literature that fake news can be detrimental to democracy through the creation of echo chambers which promote confirmation bias that ultimately can lead to a flawed understanding of an influential issue. Another danger is that while fake news is intended to imply 'misinformation' or 'disinformation', an emerging socially accepted definition of fake news is that it is information which conflicts with an already held set of beliefs; suggesting that while the information may in fact be true, it conflicts with the ideologies the consumer holds as their primary philosophy by which they see the world and therefore reject alternative discourse as 'fake news' (Berghel, 2017).

During the 2016 U.S Presidential election, a common concern among many was the possibility of fake news interference. Berghel (2017) suggested that Russian trolling, through misinformation campaigns, could have had a significant impact on the election. The author notes that psychological strategies were commonly used by a Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) to encourage an emotional reaction. The affective response is then compounded with the Streisand effect. The Streisand effect occurs when members of the public become more intrigued by information which has been the subject of an attempted cover-up. The attempt to bury fake news can unintentionally

promote the false information to have a greater impact on readers with partisan interests as these discourses are commonly “weaponized by ideologues”; this can cause consumers with strong partisan beliefs to accept the inaccurate information even in the face of significant contrary evidence (Berghel, 2017, p. 90).

2.3. The Construction of Knowledge and the Role of Claims Makers in Fake News

2.3.1. Social Construction Theory

Social constructionism is focused on the processes of social interactions that construct notions of social reality; what we perceive as knowledge is subject to an elaborate network of social interaction which influences how we understand the social and natural world (Lindgren, 2005). Further, these products are conceived through the understanding that power is exercised via social structures. Power is exercised through these social institutions and represent the constructed outcome of knowledge that becomes a segment of social reality. Power is then an integral aspect in the social construction process and is inherent to our ideas on knowledge and realities (Lindgren, 2005). Fake news construction fits within this paradigm as it is created by a claim maker who engineers the information product to be disseminated within society. It then exists as a segment of social reality as people interact with the fake news piece and interpret its derived meanings. Fake news constructionists exercise considerable power through their role in establishing knowledge (although inherently flawed) facilitated among various social structures. For example, during the 2016 U.S Presidential election, there was considerable concern regarding Russian interference authored by the Russian IRA (Berghel, 2017). The Russian IRA can be considered as a social structure which exercises its power to create information material. The organization had developed a strong hold among U.S social media consumers and provided targeted and manufactured information across their social media platforms. Through the deception on behalf of the IRA, social media users accepted the legitimacy of these groups and welcomed the constructed information materials created by the IRA to penetrate into their newsfeeds. As the IRA created social media groups and pages became socially accepted by social media users, they further evolved to become a legitimized social structure with the influential capability to create social fact. In exercising their power to

project counterfeited knowledge to the masses, they were able to inject their constructed narratives to encourage a pre-determined outcome.

2.3.2. Information Trolls and Information Warfare

Social media is the platform used by most creators of fake news to circulate their material. A key characteristic of social media is that it facilitates the exchange of images and communication in an efficient and casual manner. This feature makes trust relatively easy to establish (Waschke, 2017). While many people find social media an attractive platform to stay connected and to have a diverse body of information at their finger-tips, these qualities attract, what Waschke (2017) refers to as, the 'cybervillain'. The term cybervillain is broad. It can largely encompass any person who has any malicious intent who commits their villainous deeds within the cyberworld. While creators of fake news can be argued to fit within the definition of a cybervillain, the definition isn't specific in focus to those who intentionally manipulate the minds of consumers with falsified information.

Another potential term which can be used to refer to the perpetrators of fake news is 'moral entrepreneur' (Carlson, 2018). Based from Cohen's (1972) concept of moral panics, Carlson (2018) further applies the classic concept to fake news and the creation of public anxiety. The author approaches the topic by equating fake news to be an informational moral panic. An important element in the relation between Cohen's moral panics, and the creation and spread of fake news, is that moral panics heighten public anxiety about a specific social threat. People perceive this threat to be a considerable issue that could lead to crime and disorder. The construction of these social threats become greatly exaggerated and can dominate social discourse which may result in an over-reaction. Carlson's (2018) examination of fake news through Cohen's moral panic framework illustrates the potential social destruction that disinformation campaigns can manifest. Through the induction of moral panics, fake news can threaten the democratic process and promote social unrest towards issues that may not require immediate social reaction (Carlson, 2018). This further illustrates how fake news is not only the product of social construction but can also be consequential in an over-reaction to socially constructed threats.

Libicki (2007) discusses the concept of information warfare. Information warfare is defined by the author as “the use of information to attack information” (p. 20). This definition is based on the premise that decisions are made as a result of the information that has been received by the decision maker; if the information received by the decision maker is inaccurate, or incomplete, the decision maker’s output may not align with the decision that would have been made based on the reception of accurate aggregated data. The motivation for an information attack is to manipulate the outcome decision located on the other end of the information exchange. Typically, this will be advantageous to the attacker as they can assist in influencing poorly guided decisions or late decisions. Libicki (2007) also notes that false information can promote the receiver to make a wrong decision, but so too can adding contradicting and obscured information to the already dysfunctional information. Another method of attack mentioned is that one does not need to alter already existing information, they can instead wage war by modifying the credibility of the information that has been delivered and received. The author refers to those who engage in information war as ‘information warriors’.

Cybervillians (Waschke, 2017), moral entrepreneurs (Cohen 1972; Carlson, 2018), and information warriors (Libicki, 2007) are all accurate language to describe those who create fake news. This paper proposes another term to denote disinformation creators; the term recommended is ‘information trolls’. Internet trolling refers to someone who makes “inflammatory, rude, or upsetting statements to elicit strong emotional responses in people” (Vicente, 2020, Jan 21, para. 2). Trolls may have many motivations for their actions. They may be creating chaos in a forum for their own entertainment, or they may have a very specific agenda that can be attained by eliciting a desired emotional response among their audience (Vicente, 2020, Jan 21). Fake news writers use various techniques to push a specific agenda and can have a major impact on the views of media consumers (Guo & Vargo, 2018). The main commodity in their agenda-setting ventures is the dispersion of information. Information is a useful weapon when striving to achieve a desired outcome within the public domain. Thus, information trolls is a conclusive term to specifically address the perpetrators of fake news.

2.3.3. Media as an Information System

A computer’s information system draws many parallels to the news media information system. Libicki (2007) notes that a computer’s network is under the control of

its owner. If malicious messages infiltrate the system, this is due to there being a doorway which allowed that message entrance. Most computer network infiltrations involve deception to enable the malicious message to penetrate the system. An interesting parallel can be drawn between the computer's information system and the injection of fake news into the media ecosystem. Much like a computer's information system, weaknesses in the media's information system allow malicious fake news messages to permeate into social discourse; this attack also often requires deception to persuade the reader about the credibility of the information. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) discuss that fake news is a consequence of being a cheaper alternative to legitimate information media and of the reader's ability to critically assess psychologically crafted material intended to deceive readers. These are inherent weaknesses in the media information system through which fake news authors capitalize on as pathways to inject wrong information into the system. Deception may be used by information trolls to appear to have more credibility as a claims maker which can increase their ability to mislead a greater number of readers. Utilizing communication channels under the cloak of deception is advantageous in the propagation of false information (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). Strategic deception is then a common feature within information warfare in the context of both the computer and media's information systems (Libicki, 2007).

Another thought-provoking parallel can be drawn between Libicki's (2007) discussion on information warfare, in the context of computer systems, and matched with the media information system. According to the author, within information warfare, noise can be a detriment to the capacity for a computer system to make the correct decision. When signals are sent within a network, the ability of the system to infer effective decision-making falls on the quality and accuracy of the signals sent. With more noise, comes reduced signal. When signals become diluted, the data flow within the system decelerates and the capacity to determine the substantive information pertinent in making the required determination is hindered. This can be compared to the communication systems within information media. Fake news communicators often use noise to distract their audience or to draw further attention to an already sensationalized information environment (Guo and Vargo, 2018). With more noise, the ability to infer what is accurate and what is false can become more difficult. As social media grows to play a more significant role in information distribution, fake news dispersed through these communication channels are becoming more active and capable of injecting

deceiving information and significant noise into the minds of a democratic population (Carlson, 2018). Weaponizing information is seen as informational violence which is a form of non-material cyber attack that holds the potential to threaten an entire democratic system (Haataja, 2019). Much like a computer system, when data is rapidly ejected to the operator, the ability to make appropriate decisions decreases. Noise in the context of the media ecosystem can impact public policy and democratic elections by intentionally impeding the consumer's capacity to be fully-informed on relevant matters.

2.4. The Legality of Fake News

2.4.1. Pierre Poutine: 2011 Robocall Voter Suppression Scandal

Following the 2011 Canadian Federal election, Elections Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) were prompted to investigate a series of fraudulent phone calls that were targeted towards non-Conservative voters. These pre-recorded calls provided the recipient with inaccurate information which was seemingly intended to dissuade them from casting their ballots (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Feb 23a). In Guelph, Ontario, on the day of the Federal election, approximately 6,000 voters received automated phone calls (robocalls) which were falsely depicted as coming from Elections Canada informing the recipient that their riding location had changed (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Aug 10). There were 17 other ridings across Canada which received harassing or deceitful robocalls in an "apparent effort to discourage Liberal supporters from voting" (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Feb 23a, para. 3).

During their investigation, Elections Canada traced the number which appeared on the call display of one of the robocalls in question to Joliette, Quebec. Elections Canada then subpoenaed the cell-phone provider of that number to provide a list of all outgoing calls made by that phone number. The cell-phone in question was a burner phone that was registered to "Pierre Poutine" which had been paid for by using pre-paid credit cards (Payton, 2012, May 16). One specific call of interest made by Pierre Poutine's burner phone was to RackNine. This specific number was used by customers of the company to dial in and record their outgoing robocalls (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Feb 23b). RackNine Inc. is a company based out of Edmonton, Alberta which provides web-hosting, web-design and development, and marketing and productivity services (RackNine, 2018). The investigation into the fraudulent robocalls were traced to

the RackNine call centre. The Conservative Party of Canada had previously employed this company to work on their national campaign and also were contracted to at least nine other Conservative party candidates (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Feb 23a).

Al Mathews, the Elections Canada investigator in this case, traced the Internet Protocol (IP) address which was used to access the RackNine account in question that sent out the deceitful robocall on the day of the election. Mathews then received a court order for Rogers Communications Inc. to disclose the customer's information that is linked to the discovered IP address (Payton, 2012, May 16). Pierre Poutine's IP address was the same IP address that had been used by Andrew Prescott. Prescott at the time was the deputy campaign manager for Conservative candidate Marty Burke. Prescott's account with RackNine was used to make legitimate automated-calls on behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada. Mathews was not convinced Prescott was solely responsible for the fraudulent robocalls (Payton, 2012, May 4). Prescott later was granted a written guarantee of immunity in that the Crown had no intention of charging him in connection to the voter suppression scandal; they were solely interested in his witness account (Payton, 2014, Jan 15). According to a court filing, it was disclosed that a campaign worker named Michael Sona had spoken to two other Conservative workers and suggested that they create a disinformation campaign that would mislead the public about their polling location (Payton, 2012, May 4).

Michael Sona was later convicted in August 2014 for preventing, or attempting to prevent, Canadian voters from voting in the 2011 Federal election in Guelph, Ontario (*R. v. Sona*, 2014). Justice G. F. Hearn, during the ruling in Superior Court in Guelph, Ontario, was not convinced that Sona acted alone as there was evidence to suggest that multiple people were involved in the misleading robocalls. However, Justice Hearn noted that it was Sona's "arrogance and self-importance" which endorsed his disclosure of the plan to suppress votes to the witnesses in this case (*R. v. Sona*, 2014, para 178.7). More than 6,700 Guelph homes were targeted in this attack which directed voters to the wrong polling stations during the Canadian Federal election on May 2, 2011 (Rogers, 2014, Aug 14). On November 19, 2014 Justice Hearn sentenced Sona to a 9-month term of imprisonment and a 12-month period of probation (*R. v. Sona*, 2014).

2.4.2. Voter Suppression Robocalls: Federal Election 2019

During the 2019 Canadian Federal Election, Elections Canada received reports of robocalls which directed the call recipient to vote on October 22, 2019, one day after the election. These robocalls were reported in Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Upon further investigation, CBC News traced the calls to the “Canada Strong and Proud” group (Bellemare & Rogers, 2019, Oct 21). Canada Strong and Proud was officially registered as a third-party in the federal election in July 2019. In June 2019, the group sent out a series of robocalls asking for information about how the call recipient intended to vote in the upcoming election and whether they supported the controversial pipelines. Canada Strong and Proud has a history of employing automated messaging tactics in both federal and provincial campaigns (Paas-Lang, 2019, July 25). Ontario Proud, which is a localized affiliation of the Canada Strong and Proud group, reportedly received nearly \$460,000 in corporate donations to fund their campaign to vote the Liberals out of office in the 2019 election. Common tactics used by this group involved sharing viral memes and social media content to attract a large audience and generate support for their campaign (Rogers, 2019, Aug 6). The Canada Proud and Strong group who were responsible for the misleading robocalls stated that these calls were accidental. The organization responded by stating that the calls informing people to vote “tomorrow” were to be sent out on October 20, 2019 (the day before the election), but a small percentage were accidentally sent out on election day. However, many call recipients reported the call to explicitly state that voting was to occur on October 22, 2019 which is the day after the election when polls are no longer open (Bellemare & Rogers, 2019, Oct 21).

There currently is no public information about an investigation into the 2019 misleading robocalls. Given the circumstances detailed, it does appear to be suspicious and resembles the voter suppression activity which occurred in 2011. While Canada Proud and Strong is not directly affiliated with an electoral party, this does not mean that they are immune to the laws and regulations governing Canadian elections. In accordance with the *Canada Elections Act* (2000), S. 282.6 states that, “no person shall prevent or attempt to prevent an elector from voting at an election”. Regardless of third-party election status, Canada Proud and Strong is not exempt from this section. If it were to be determined that any member of this group orchestrated the robocalls to be sent out to recipients in attempts to prevent their vote from being cast, they would be prosecuted

similar to the precedent set by the *R. v. Sona* (2014) decision. However, claiming accidental negligence may be a less concrete prosecution. The difference between “vote tomorrow” and “vote on October 22nd” could have very different trial outcomes. Considering the evidence that this same group had previously sent out wide-spread text messages asking for information from recipients on how they intended to vote, it is plausible that this generated a list of voters whose votes they aimed to suppress. Further, in examining the funding of the Ontario Proud splinter group, the means and infrastructure to enact voter suppression tactics are readily available.

2.4.3. Misinformation Campaigns by Foreign Entities

Russian Trolling During the 2016 U.S Presidential Election

There is plenty of evidence to support Russian interference and manipulation in the 2016 U.S Presidential election (Haataja, 2019). One method of cyber attack which occurred during the time of the election involved obtaining unauthorized access to computers and networks. This resulted in classified data being leaked from those sources which were then utilized to orchestrate further manipulation and disruption of the electoral process. Haataja (2019) notes that with the leaked data, Russian entities were able to successfully coordinate more directed attacks on specific targets. This provided the attackers with more sensitive information as users who were successfully misled by the spear-phishing emails downloaded malicious software that facilitated data to be transferred to the foreign entities. The data collected in this attack was exploited to inform various strategies used by Russian hackers to weaken the Democratic Party’s electoral appeal (Haataja, 2019).

Weaponizing information to attack a nation’s democratic process is a form of informational violence (Haataja, 2019). One significant information-based attack used during the 2016 U.S Presidential election was the dispersion of misinformation campaigns (Berghel, 2017). Through propagating divisive dialogue via fake news outlets, manipulation of voter’s values and beliefs became possible. Russian information trolls used information to influence political ideology (Berghel, 2017; Haataja, 2019). While there currently is no evidence or reason to suggest that Russian interference was involved in the 2019 Canadian Federal election, based on what occurred within the context of the 2016 Presidential Election, it is not outside the realm of possibility. If

Canada were to have experienced similar intervention from foreign entities in the democratic process of the election, there are criminal sanctions which apply. If an attacker were to infiltrate a given computer or network without administrator permissions to withdraw data or to install malicious software, this would be in direct violation of section 342.1 of the *Criminal Code of Canada* (1985). Section 342.1 discusses offences related to unauthorized use of a computer. Within this section, anyone who accesses a computer service or network without authorization can be punished under summary conviction. If the person who accessed the computer without authorization has used the information to commit another crime, section 430 of the *Criminal Code of Canada* (1985) will be applied; however, within the framework of information attacks to manipulate democratic decisions, the application of this section becomes less concrete. Section 430(1.1) discusses mischief in relation to computer data and states that,

Everyone commits mischief who willfully ^(a)destroys or alters computer data; ^(b) renders computer data meaningless, useless or ineffective; ^(c) obstructs, interrupts or interferes with the lawful use of computer data; or ^(d) obstructs, interrupts or interferes with a person in the lawful use of computer data or denies access to computer data to a person who is entitled to access to it

Any person who is guilty of mischief in relation to a computer who causes danger to life will be charged under indictment and may be liable for life imprisonment (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s. 430(2)). Any person whose mischief in relation to a computer causes monetary loss to a person's property that exceeds \$5000 is punishable under indictable offence with a maximum prison term of ten years (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s. 430(3)). Any person who does commit mischief in relation to a computer but does not endanger a life or cause monetary loss over \$5000 can be found guilty of an indictable offence and be sentence to a prison term not exceeding two years (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s. 430(4)). In understanding the punishment of section 430, the consequences of inciting an information war through use of a computer become a little blurry. While the person responsible for the information attack may destroy or alter data, they might interfere with the use of the computer, they may even deny access to the computer's authorized owner, it is unlikely that they will threaten the life of a person. Further, as monetary gain is not the motive of this crime, they are not looking to benefit from the computer user's financial well-being. Their intent is to obtain data that will assist them in political interference; it becomes extremely difficult to assign monetary value in this

circumstance. In application of section 430 of the *Criminal Code* (1985), engaging in information warfare through use of computer is likely to illicit a punishment of no more than two year in prison.

Section 282.4 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000) is more straightforward in its application to the interference of foreign entities in democratic elections. This section states that no person who is not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident of Canada can influence an elector to vote or not vote, or to unduly influence them to vote or not vote for a particular candidate or party. This includes foreign governments, political parties, and corporations that do not hold any business in Canada. However, with the advanced and covert psychologically manipulative techniques that are often utilized in the creation and dispersion of fake news, it would be difficult to prove that the exposure to the propagandistic materials had an unduly influence on the voter to vote for the intended party.

Information Trolls During the 2019 Canadian Federal Election

Within the context of the 2019 Canadian Federal election, there is current evidence to suggest that, much like the influence of the Russian IRA in the 2016 U.S Presidential election, there was a misinformation campaign at play in targeting Canadian democracy during Canada's 2019 Federal election. During the time leading up to the election, *The Buffalo Chronicle* became a significant concern to the legitimate Canadian news media and the Canadian government due to viral stories being published on their website which contained material depicting information that had minimal or zero factual basis (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). In an investigation completed by investigative reporter, Marco Oved, and two Buzzfeed journalists, Jane Lytvynenko and Craig Silverman (2019), it was confirmed that the person behind the website, Matthew Ricchiazzi ¹had previously offered his services to individuals and businesses to publish positive or negative coverage of political candidates for a price. In their investigation of election records, they discovered that in 2018 Ricchiazzi received \$2000 (USD) and *The Buffalo Chronicle* received \$1000 (USD) from a political committee which was formed to advocate for the election of Joel Giambra as Governor of New York. Regardless of being debunked by a variety of fact-checking sources, *The Buffalo Chronicle's* stories were

¹ While Ricchiazzi has been determined to be the person behind the Buffalo Chronicle's website, no link can be made that he is the owner of The Buffalo Chronicle Media Group.

liked, commented, and shared by Facebook users over 200,000 times and they had accumulated 4.4 million Facebook fans². Of further interest, while the website is said to cover both U.S and Canadian political content and is based in Buffalo, New York, 8 out of the 10 the *Buffalo Chronicle's* most popular articles on Facebook were related to Canadian politics and were published on their website within the 8 months prior to the Canadian election (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). Many of the stories are published anonymously without mention of the article's author and include unsubstantiated stories with anonymous sources cited (News Guard Tech, 2020).

Another considerable red-flag in relation to *The Buffalo Chronicle* is that while the website appears to be owned by Ricchiazzi, the copyright statement identifies 'The Buffalo Chronicle Media Group'. However, according to News Guard Tech (2020), there are no companies registered under that name in New York, any where else in the U.S, or in Canada. *The Buffalo Chronicle's* website domain is registered with a service which provides the owner with anonymity over their location and identity. To increase further suspicion, the website's contact address provides a location in Buffalo, New York; however, the address associated belongs to an abandoned building (News Guard Tech, 2020). Due to minimal transparency in both company ownership and journalist identity, a history of publishing false stories, previous transactions with political advocacy committees, and the use of a service to keep the domain owner's identity anonymous, it is possible that a significant foreign entity played a role in influencing the 2019 Canadian election. It is clear that Canada was a victim of an active disinformation campaign; however, the person, company, or group responsible for waging an information attack on Canadian democracy is unclear.

2.4.4. Difficulties in Investigating and Prosecuting Information Trolls

While Canada does have legislation in place which can be applied in the response to information warfare, there are many obstacles faced by the justice system in investigating and prosecuting these cyber crimes. Cyber crime is complex. It provides the legal system with many barriers and hurdles to overcome when it is tasked to respond to it. Internet Protocol (IP) addresses may be obtained that can assist in the

² At present day, The Buffalo Chronicle's Facebook page only observes 2,412 followers (Sept 21st, 2020). This may suggest a sufficient number of fake accounts supported the page to increase the appearance of legitimacy

identification of the suspect involved in the related cyber crime offence. However, the IP address alone is not sufficient evidence as a user with technological know-how can simply circumvent detection through manipulating their IP details. This makes identifying the suspect behind the computer increasingly more difficult without an expert understanding of cyber investigative methods (Kao & Wang, 2009). As seen in the previous section, using technology as a tool to infiltrate the minds of voters to engineer a desired political result can have legal consequences. Unfortunately, the capacity for police to conduct complex investigations within the intricate bounds of technology may be limited by tools and technological expertise; as crime progresses away from physical reality and becomes more heavily entrenched in the digital domain, the demand for investigators and prosecutors who maintain an expert understanding of the digital environment becomes increasingly necessary (Brown, 2015).

As investigations into technology facilitated political crimes become difficult to undertake for many reasons, so does the prosecution of the offence. Perpetrators of the crime may not even reside in the country where the crime has occurred. Within the example of Russian trolling during the 2016 U.S presidential election, the people responsible for the politically motivated crimes, committed the crime within the boundaries of the U.S, but were outside influencers. If the person or people responsible for an international cyber offence were to be successfully investigated and identified, an extradition treaty may not exist between the two countries involved. This is the case between the U.S and the Russian Federation which causes a great difficulty in prosecuting the offence(s) (Smith, Grabosky, & Urbas, 2004). Further, as noted by Smith et al. (2004), even in the cases where an extradition treaty exists, to successfully extradite the accused requires the support of the relevant police organization. Some police organizations, depending on the type of offence committed, may not want to allocate their resources to assist in the facilitation of justice in another country. Under Canadian law, section 3.7 of the *Criminal Code of Canada* (1985), determines Canadian legal jurisdiction. This section states that any person outside of Canada who commits an act (that would constitute a criminal offence if it were to be committed within Canada) against a Canadian citizen, they are deemed to have committed that act within Canada and are subject to legal punishment within the Canadian justice system. However, investigating the person(s) responsible for the offence relies on numerous factors and

barriers with considerable weight placed on the level of international cooperation and the existence of an extradition treaty.

2.4.5. Fake News and Freedom of Expression

A blurred line exists when discussing the legitimacy of fake news on social media platforms and the ambiguity of its protection under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982). Section 2 of the *Charter* sets out the protection for freedom of speech in Canada. Freedom of expression is a fundamental freedom guaranteed under the *Charter*; however, there are reasonable limits to this freedom. Hate speech, obscenity, and defamation are exclusions to the rule and are enforced under “reasonable limits”. The question within the context of disinformation campaigns then becomes, to what extent is the dissemination of inaccurate or false information deemed to be protected under section 2 of the *Charter*? In *R. v. Elliot* (2016), section 2 of the *Charter* came into question when the accused, Gregory Elliot, used Twitter as a platform to engage in debate with Stephanie Guthrie, a feminist activist. Elliot posted tweets criticizing Guthrie on both her online activism and her activities offline. Elliot was later charged with criminal harassment, but his charges were dismissed as there was no evidence of threat to Guthrie which would be required for a successful conviction of criminal harassment. Further, Elliot’s opinions being publicized on social media platforms are protected as they do not fall under any of the exclusionary rules set out under section 2 of the *Charter*. This case has many implications for social media information dissemination. Groups who are unaffiliated with the news media, and are therefore not bound by journalistic integrity, have the legitimized ability to use social media platforms as a means to propagate intentionally misleading information provided that it does not fall under hate speech, obscenity, or defamation. The freedom to express this information is protected under their guaranteed protection to express themselves freely.

When misleading information reaches a consumer, they ultimately decide whether they fully or partially believe or disbelieve the content. The sharing of fake news on social media platforms further expands the ability to reach more readers and bolsters the propagation of the message conveyed; this has the potential for catastrophic repercussions. Through exploring the relevant literature, it becomes apparent that disinformation campaigns are akin to warfare. Information becomes a highly commodified tool to engage in information war. While the creation and dissemination of

fake news is not necessarily legal, the ability to investigate and prosecute the information trolls who create the misleading content is impeded by many obstacles. As misleading robocalls have been reported in relation to the 2019 Canadian Federal election and they appear to be motivated by voter suppression, it becomes relevant and critical to further explore the potential interference in the democratic process.

Chapter 3.

Study 1 – Quantitative Analysis

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research aims to answer two main research questions:

Research Question 1: Was fake news delivered during the election and if so, could it have had an effect the outcome of the 2019 Canadian Federal election results?

Research Question 2: Was there any criminal interference involved during the time of the 2019 Canadian Federal election in relation to delivering false information through social media, news outlets, or robocalls?

To answer the two main research questions, a mixed-methods approach was developed. This research will first begin by quantitatively analyzing survey data collected for the purposes of this research. Due to the complexity of the larger research questions, 4 sub-research questions were created for quantitative exploration. The 4 sub questions that will be the focus of this chapter's analysis are:

Sub-Research Question 1: Do the use social media platforms effect whether a participant will decide to change their vote?

Hypothesis 1: It is predicted that the use of social media will influence political decisions. As social media becomes more readily available and enables users to engage with news and informational content with increased speed and efficiency, it is hypothesized that exposure to social media will contribute to a participant's change of mind about the original party they intended to vote for.

Sub-Research Question 2: Does real news have an effect on whether a participant will change their vote?

Hypothesis 2: It is predicted that exposure to real news will increase the probability that a participant will change their mind about their election decision. Articles that depict accurate information are likely to provide information regarding the election that consumers rely on to remain informed regarding election issues of interest. It is likely that reading reliable new articles will affect their voting decision.

Sub-Research Question 3: Does reading fake news have an effect on whether a participant will change their vote?

Hypothesis 3: It is hypothesized that exposure to fake news will influence change voter's political decisions. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) note that fake news articles are becoming increasingly wide-spread. Fake news items are a cheaper alternative to reliable information media. As more people become exposed to misinformation and disinformation, this may influence their decision.

Sub-Research Question 4: Does believing fake news have an effect on whether a participant will change their vote?

Hypothesis 4: It is hypothesized that those who believe fake news articles to be true are more likely to be influenced politically. Consumers are exposed to an increased number of fake news articles which makes it more difficult to infer what information is accurate and what is misleading or untrue (Carlson, 2018). It is predicted that those who believe the truth of deceptive media are likely to be persuaded to vote differently.

3.1.2. Survey Data: Sampling and Recruitment

The quantitative dataset analyzed in this research was created through the use of a post-election survey. The survey (see Appendix A) was delivered online through various social media outlets from February 6th, 2020 to June 26th, 2020. The online survey was created through Qualtrics survey software. The inclusion criteria for this research required that participants be over the age of 18, be a Canadian citizen, and that they voted in the 2019 Canadian Federal election. A criterion sampling method was utilized as it was necessary for this research to include participants who fit the specific study criterion outlined (Palys & Atchinson, 2014). As this research requires Canadian citizens who have voted in the election, and are active on social media, it was necessary to reach out to potential respondents through posting advertisements containing the survey URL on various social media platforms where these specific participants would be likely to frequent. Further, a snowball sampling technique was also utilized. Advertisements of the study were shared on Facebook. As each Facebook user shared the survey invitation on their own page, the exposure of the survey increased its exposure to be included in new networks of potential participants.

The survey was distributed across Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. When advertising the survey on Facebook, a link to the survey was shared publicly to the researcher's personal page. This method received 27 responses. The survey link was

posted a total of four times during the 141-day data collection period and 11 people shared the survey link on their own personal Facebook page. Twitter attracted 19 responses. The survey link was posted on the researcher's twitter page. To increase the reach of the survey, the researcher included the hashtags, '#cdnpoli' and '#canadianpolitics'. Hashtags are labels that are used to categorize information. Once a hashtag is created and used, this enables social media users to have more simplified access to information which is related to the hashtag used (Taylor, 2015). The overall theme of this study relates to Canadian politics. Using a hashtag that symbolizes the study theme enables the survey to reach users who have an interest in politics in Canada and increase survey exposure to suitable participants. Reddit generated 87.7% of all responses (n = 270). Reddit is a large social media network that is divided into millions of 'sub-Reddits' (Widman, 2020). Much like hashtags, sub-Reddits symbolize information about a given topic or theme. When users subscribe to a subreddit, they have access to information that is relevant to the scope of the subreddit of interest. During the data collection, the survey was posted onto 24 different sub-Reddits (see Table 3.1) through the researcher's Reddit account.

Table 3.1. Reddit Survey Participant Recruitment

Name of Subreddit	Number of Upvotes	Number of Comments	Number of Times Posted to Subreddit
r/onguardforthee	15	0	2
r/ryerson	1	0	1
r/uAlberta	4	2	1
r/usask	1	0	1
r/fredericton	6	1	1
r/richmondbc	6	2	1
r/canadaleft	5	1	1
r/academiccanada	5	1	2
r/BCpolitics	7	4	2
r/simonfraser	16	2	2
r/CanadianPolitics	20	0	2
r/ndp	13	5	2
r/LPC	13	0	2
r/ManitobaPolitics	1	1	1
r/Albertapolitics	4	0	1
r/OntarioPolitics	10	1	1
r/NovaScotia	4	2	1
r/PeoplesPartyofCanada	0	0	1
r/newbrunswickcanada	0	0	1
r/metacanada	0	8	1
r/GreenPartyOfCanada	4	0	1
r/SampleSize	3	0	1
r/CanadaPolitics	1	0	1
r/Vancouver	1	0	1

The number of upvotes the survey post received on each subreddit may have some indication as to which posting attracted the highest number of survey respondents. Upvotes are user driven. If a post receives a high number of upvotes, this will increase the post's visibility on that specific subreddit. Likewise, if the post receives few upvotes, or many downvotes, the post's visibility will decrease on the subreddit and the post will be brought down to the bottom of the subreddit feed (Widman, 2020). Based on the number of upvotes received, reddit users from r/CanadianPolitics, r/simonfraser, r/onguardforthee, r/ndp, r/LPC, and r/OntarioPolitics are likely to be the sub-Reddits where the majority of the survey respondents were recruited from on Reddit. The number of comments could also be used as an indicator to determine which sub-Reddit

attracted more participants; however, upvotes are likely a stronger indicator as Reddit upvotes manipulate the exposure of each post, comments do not (Widman, 2020).

The survey was modelled after Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) post-election survey which examined fake news during the 2016 Presidential election. The survey in the current study was adapted to generate similar data surrounding fake news delivered during the 2019 Canadian Federal election. Questions were asked regarding their demographics, political affiliation, and media usage habits. Further, the survey respondents were exposed to 9 headline-related questions (see Table 3.2). Each respondent was presented with four headlines that consisted of real news articles which had been distributed by reputable journalistic new sources in the month leading up to the election. Additionally, four fake news headlines were included in the survey. The news stories corresponding to these headlines were fictitious and contained unverified facts, speculation without merit, and/or extreme exaggeration of real facts; further, they were delivered through un reputable sources. Finally, one headline was included as a placebo to control for false recall on survey responses (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The placebo headline was created by the researcher. In crafting this headline, the researcher aimed to ensure that it was a headline which depicted a story that did not happen but was not so far outside out the realm of possibility. To prevent bias, the headlines were chosen to be inclusive of the all parties involved in the election. However, all fake headlines that were uncovered were found to be targeting the Liberal Party of Canada. In searching for fake headlines, there appeared to be zero fake news headlines which focused on a political party other than the Liberals.

Table 3.2. Real News and Fake News Headlines

Headline	Source	Date	News Type	Variable Name
"Singh says NDP would form coalition with the Liberals to stop Tories"	CTV News	13-Oct-19	Real	Real News 1
"NDP Brampton-Centre candidate apologizes for offensive tweet from 2012"	Global News	17-Oct-19	Real	Real News 2
"Scheer won't say if Conservatives hired consultant to 'destroy' People's Party"	CTV News	19-Oct-19	Real	Real News 3
"Edmonton Strathcona Green Party candidate drops out, asks supporters to vote NDP"	The National Post	16-Oct-19	Real	Real News 4
"Justin Trudeau is trying to rig the election through controlling the Canadian news media"	Canada Proud	12-Oct-19	Fake	Fake News 1
"RCMP plans to charge Trudeau with obstruction in SNC Lavalin affair, following federal elections"	The Buffalo Chronicle	17-Oct-19	Fake	Fake News 2
"RCMP source says 'security risk' against Trudeau was contrived by PMO staffers"	The Buffalo Chronicle	15-Oct-19	Fake	Fake News 3
"Elections Canada attempts to combat huge number of non-Canadians on voting register"	The Post Millennial	06-Oct-19	Fake	Fake News 4
"Trudeau's visit to Cuba – PM promises to provide financial aid to the country as US embargo discussions persist"			Placebo	Placebo

3.2. Variables

A total of 308 responses were received during the approximate 141-day data collection period. From the original 308 survey responses, a total of 118 cases were removed from the analysis for various reasons (N = 190). Of the 118 removed cases, 70 cases were incomplete. To ensure that results would be analyzable, if less than 70% of

the survey questions were filled in, they were omitted from further analysis. Typically, the majority of incomplete cases were left completely blank. This is likely to occur when a user opens the survey link, agrees to participate, and then closes their browser. After removing 70 incomplete responses, another 25 cases were removed because they did not experience the dependent variable in this data, they left the survey question relating to the main dependent variable blank, or they preferred not to discuss their exposure to the dependent variable. Next, 1 additional case was removed due to the survey responses being too outlandish and clearly fictitious. Finally, 22 more cases were removed from the survey data as they answered “yes” to the placebo question. The total remaining number of cases included for analysis in Study 1 is 190.

3.2.1. Dependent Variable: Change of Vote

The main dependent variable in this study is derived from the survey question which asks, “based on what you observed in the media regarding the election, did it change your decision to switch from one party to another for your vote?”. From this question, the Change of Vote variable was created. All cases where the survey respondent answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ remained unchanged. Those who selected, “I did not observe any media related to the election”, when asked about whether they had changed their vote due to something they observed in media, are the 25 cases which were previously mentioned that were removed because they did not experience the dependent variable in this data . If survey respondents have not observed or been exposed to media regarding the election, they would likely not be impacted by the effects of election-related stories. Further, survey respondents who chose to select “prefer not to say” or left the answer blank were removed as they do not want to discuss their experiences on this question. This variable was treated as a dichotomous variable.

3.2.2. Independent Variables

Headline Variables

The headline variables as shown in Table 2 include a combination of real and fake news, as well as a placebo headline. Respondents were first asked if they remember seeing the headline during the time of the election. In 22 cases, respondents believed that they had seen the placebo headline during the time of the election; those

cases were removed from further analysis. The placebo headline was created to serve as an attention check (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). If participants thought they came across the made-up headline, their other survey responses may lack reliability due to false recall. In recoding these variables, all 'yes' and 'no' answers remained unchanged. All 'not sure' and 'prefer not to say' responses were recoded as 'no'³. If the participant has doubts about whether they read the headline or not, it is more likely that they have not. For those who say they have seen the news piece, they have clear memory of coming across it and their inclination to respond with 'yes' is more definitive. All headline variables were treated as dichotomous variables.

Perceived Truth Variables

Once participants responded to the headline questions asking whether they have seen the highlighted news articles, they were then asked, "at the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?". This study refers to these variables as the Perceived Truth Variables. Each headline has a relative perceived truth variable. In recoding these variables, all 'yes' and 'no' answers remained unchanged. All 'not sure' and 'prefer not to say' responses were recoded as 'no'. If the participant has doubts about the truth of the headline, it is likely that they do not fully believe it. Those who believe the truth of the headline are likely to answer with more certainty. As many people did not see these headlines, and therefore were not asked whether they believed the news piece to be true, all non-answers were recoded into 'did not see'.⁴ All perceived truth variables were treated as categorical variables.

Demographic Variables

Demographic variables in the study include age, gender, education, income, and number of languages spoken.

³ Headline variables were recoded as follows: 0 = No, 1 = Yes

⁴ The perceived truth variables were recoded as follows: 0 = Did not see news item, 1 = No, 2 = Yes

Gender

Gender includes 3 categories. These categories include male, female, and gender-queer/non-binary⁵. Gender was treated as a categorical variable.

Age

The survey (Appendix A) separated age range into 7 categories. The age variables were recoded into 5 categories to condense data due to having a small sample size. The age categories include: 18 - 25 years old, 26 - 34 years old, 35 - 43 years old, 44 - 52 years old, and 53 years and above⁶. From the raw survey data, groups 53 - 61 years old, 62 - 70 years old, and 71 and above were recoded into 53 years and above to provide a more even distribution. Age was treated as a continuous variable that is not normally distributed.⁷

Education

The survey separated education into 7 categories. During recode, the variables were simplified into 5 categories which include high school, trade school, undergraduate degree, graduate degree, and prefer not to say⁸. The original survey categorized master's degree and PhD separately. These two categories were recoded together to make up the graduate degree category. Education is treated as a categorical variable.

Income

Income includes 6 categories. These categories include less than \$24,999, \$25,000 - \$49,999, \$50,000 - \$99,999, \$100,000 - \$199,999, more than \$200,000 and prefer not to say⁹. Income is treated as a continuous variable that follows a non-normal distribution¹⁰.

⁵ The gender variable was coded as follows: 0 = Man, 1 = Woman, 2 = Gender-queer/Non-binary

⁶ The age variable was recoded as follows: 0 = 18 – 25 years old, 1 = 26 – 34 years old, 2 = 35 – 43 years old, 3 = 44 – 52 years old, 4 = 53+

⁷ Skewness = .68, Kurtosis = -.53. Visual confirmation of non-normal distribution.

⁸ The education was recoded as follows: 0 = High School, 1 = Trade School, 2 = Undergraduate Degree, 3 = Graduate Degree, 4 = Prefer Not to Say

⁹ The income variable was coded as follows: 0 = less than \$24,999, 1 = \$25,000 - \$49,999, 2 = \$50,000 - \$99,999, 3 = \$100,000 - \$199,999, 4 = more than \$200,000, 5 = prefer not to say

¹⁰ Skewness = .21, Kurtosis = -.69. Visual confirmation of non-normal distribution.

Number of Languages Spoken

The number of languages spoken by the participant includes 4 categories. These categories include 1 language, 2 languages, 3 or more languages, and prefer not to say¹¹. Number of languages spoken is treated as a categorical variable. Although categories are linear, only three categories of measurement are included which requires this variable to not be considered as continuous.

Political Affiliation

The survey asked respondents to describe their political view. While it may be difficult for a person to self-assess which political category they believe they fall within, as people may occupy a variety of affiliations depending on their stance on a given issue (Allen & Vaughn, 2016). The survey designed the options to align with the political spectrum. Survey participants had the option to select between one of the following: very liberal, slightly liberal, neutral, slightly conservative, very conservative, other, and prefer not to say. Respondents who selected 'other' were then provided the option to write their political alignment in a text box. The researcher examined the 'other' category responses created by survey participants and determined that it was necessary to create another category. Seven respondents reported that their political affiliation falls under socialism. The 'other' category was recoded into 'socialist'¹². This variable is treated as categorical.

Media Usage Habits

To determine social media usage habits and what media platforms people commonly use to find information about the election, the survey included questions which asked respondents to determine their time spent on Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. Participants were also asked to indicate which media platform was their primary source for election information.

Social Media Usage - Time on Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr

Respondents were asked to assess how much time they spent on each platform daily. For each social media platform, the participant was given a choice to select one

¹¹ The number of languages spoken variable was coded as follow: 1 = 1 language, 2 = 2 languages, 3 = 3 or more languages, 4 = prefer not to say

¹² The political affiliation variable was coded as follows: 0 = Socialist, 1 = Very Liberal, 2 = Slightly Liberal, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Slightly Conservative, 5 = Very Conservative

from the following: none, less than 1 hour, 1 – 2 hours, 2 – 3 hours, 3 – 4 hours, and more than 4 hours¹³. Time spent on Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram are all treated as continuous variables that are not normally distributed¹⁴.

Primary Source of Election Information

The survey asked participants to disclose which form of media was their primary source of election information during the 2019 Canadian Federal election. The available options to select included: TV, social media, internet (not including social media platforms), radio, newspaper (printed), door to door party representatives, telephone callers, brochures in mail, emails sent on behalf of the political party, other, and prefer not to say. Those who selected 'other' were given the option to write what their source of primary source of information was that did not fall within the listed options. Six respondents mentioned with that they primarily relied on their friends and family for election-related information. The researcher created a friends and family category¹⁵. The remaining 'other' answers fell within the options provided in the survey and they were assigned to the category they represented. No respondent selected 'prefer not to say' which resulted in the removal of that category from the variable. This variable was treated as categorical.

3.2.3. Analytic Strategy

SPSS 24 was used to conduct all statistical analyses. First, the frequency counts and percentages of each variable are explored to help situate the data and understand the trends that occur within the dataset. In addition, this study begins by cross tabulating the dependent variable with each independent variable to determine whether the dependent variable is significantly associated with any of the independent variable. For all continuous variables tested against the change of vote variable (CV), Spearman's

¹³ The social media usage variables were coded as follows: 0 = none, 1 = less than 1 hour, 2 = 1 – 2 hours, 3 = 2 – 3 hours, 4 = 3 – 4 hours, 5 = more than 4 hours

¹⁴ Reddit – Skewness: -.17, Kurtosis: -.89, Facebook – Skewness: .82, Kurtosis: .32, Twitter – Skewness: 1.06, Kurtosis: .84, Tumblr – Skewness: 4.74, Kurtosis: 28.20, Instagram – Skewness: 1.04, Kurtosis: .47. Visual confirmation of non-normal distribution.

¹⁵ The primary source of election information variable was recoded as follows: 0 = TV, 1 = Social Media, 2 = internet (not including social media platforms), 3 = Radio, 4 = Newspaper (printed), 5 = Magazine, 6 = Family and Friends, 7 = Brochures in Mail, 8 = Email Sent on Behalf of Political Parties, 9 = None, 10 = Telephone Callers

rank correlation coefficient is examined. As all continuous variables in this study are not normally distributed, non-parametric tests are applied. For cross tabulations between CV and all categorical variables, Phi¹⁶ or Cramer's V¹⁷ is reported. The cross tabulation helps to determine which factors may be relevant in understanding why someone may change how they decide to vote, and which variables may have a relationship with that decision. The significant values from this cross-tabulation are used as an indicator to include those variables for further analysis.

Next, further relationships are explored through the bivariate correlation matrix which cross-tabulates each independent variable against each other. In addition to reporting Spearman's rank correlation coefficient as a non-parametric test of association between non-normally distributed continuous variables, and Phi and Cramer's V for all categorical cross tabulations, Kruskal-Wallis H was used as a non-parametric test to determine if relationships existed between one continuous variable with another.

Following this, four separate binary logistic regressions were conducted to determine which predictors have a significant impact on the likelihood that a participant may have changed their vote due to media influence. These regressions are directed by sub-research questions 1 through 4. Binary logistic regression is best suited for an adequately sized sample. However, given that this sample is relatively small (N = 190), it is important to not overload the regression with predictors. To prevent the model from being overfitted, smaller research questions were formulated to reduce the number of predictors in each model. Overfitting regression models may cause regression coefficients, r-squared values, and significance values to be misleading (Babyak, 2004). An attempt was made to reduce the number of predictors through a factor analysis; however, this data reduction method was unsuccessful. This research uses smaller research questions with less predictors per model to decrease the possibility of having an overfitted regression model which would reduce the strength of the research's ability to explain the relationships that occur.

¹⁶ Phi is reported for 2 x 2 tables where both the DV and IV are dichotomous

¹⁷ Cramer's V is reported for categorical variables when tables are larger than 2 x 2

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Descriptive Statistic Analysis

Demographic Factors and the Influence of Media on Political Decisions

Table 3.3 illustrates the descriptive demographic information reported by survey respondents (N = 190) and their relationship to the dependent variable – change of vote (CV). Within CV, 22.1% of all respondents changed their vote based on media influence (n = 42).

Gender (n = 190) is the only demographic variable that shows a significant relationship to CV ($\Phi = .18, p < .05$). Of the 124 men in this study, 17.7% of men (n = 22) ultimately changed their voting decision. Of the 59 women in this study, 32.2% of women (n = 19) changed how they voted during the election. There are 5 participants who identified as gender-queer/non-binary; none of these participants reported to have changed their voting decision. Within the age demographic variable (n = 190, SD = 1.28, Mean = 1.43), the largest age group is the 26 – 34 age category (n = 61). 23.6% of respondents who are between the ages of 26 to 34 are reported to fall within the CV group. Respondents who have completed an undergraduate degree (n = 64) reported the highest frequency (n = 18) of CV compared to other education levels and represent 42.9% of all those who have changed their voting outcome. Within the household income variable (n = 190, SD = 1.51, Mean = 2.22), participants whose household income falls within the \$50,000 - \$99,999 range (n = 52) contributed to the highest frequency of vote changes (n = 12) and represent 28.6% of the CV group. Those who speak one language (n = 119) belong to the largest language category; further, they contribute to the highest frequency of votes changed (n = 25) and account for 59.5% of the CV group.

Table 3.3 Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables

		Change of Vote Status		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>χ² (p)</i>	<i>Phi Cramer's V</i>
		Vote Not Changed	Vote Changed				
Gender						.05*	.18
	Man	102 (81.6%)	22 (18.4%)				
	Woman	40 (67.8%)	19 (32.2%)				
	Gender-Queer/Non-Binary	5 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
Age ^a				1.43	1.28	.91	.01
	18 - 25	42 (79.2%)	11 (20.8%)				
	26 - 34	46 (75.4%)	15 (24.6%)				
	35 - 43	29 (74.4%)	10 (25.6%)				
	44 - 52	16 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
	53+	15 (71.4%)	6 (28.6%)				
Level of Education						.46	.14
	High School	48 (80.0%)	12 (20.0%)				
	Trade School	28 (82.4%)	6 (17.6%)				
	Undergraduate	46 (71.9%)	18 (28.1%)				
	Graduate	20 (76.9%)	6 (23.1%)				
	Prefer Not to Say	6 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
Household Income ^a				2.22	1.51	.53	.40
	Less than \$24,999	27 (81.8%)	6 (18.2%)				
	\$25,000 - \$49,999	17 (65.4%)	9 (34.6%)				
	\$50,000 - \$99,999	40 (76.9%)	12 (23.1%)				
	\$100,000 - \$199,999	38 (82.6%)	8 (17.4%)				
	More than \$200,000	8 (66.7%)	4 (33.3%)				
	Prefer Not to Say	18 (85.7%)	3 (14.3%)				
Number of Languages						.89	.06
	One	94 (79.0%)	25 (21.0%)				
	Two	45 (76.3%)	14 (23.7%)				
	Three or More	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)				
	Prefer Not to Say	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				

Note. a Variable with a subscript contains Kruskal Wallace test results

DV: Change of Vote

*p < 0.05

Self-Identified Political Affiliation and the Influence of Media on Political Decisions

Table 3.4 illustrates descriptive statistics for political affiliation. Additionally, this table also reveals information between self-identified political alignments and the change of vote status per each respondent (n = 190). There is no significant relationship

between the political affiliation variable and the dependent variable. Most respondents (37.9%) identify as having a very liberal political alignment (n = 72). 83.3% of participants within the very liberal category did not change their mind about their voting decision (n = 60), 12 participants (16.7%) within this category did change their voting outcome. Participants who identified as having a socialist affiliation (n = 14) and those who identified as having a moderate affiliation (n = 16) belong to the groups with the lowest overall frequency across all political affiliation categories.

Table 3.4 Descriptive Statistics for Political Affiliation

	Change of Vote Status		χ^2 (p)	Phi Cramer's V
	Vote Not Changed	Vote Changed		
Political Affiliation			.32	.18
Socialist	11 (78.6%)	3 (21.4%)		
Very Liberal	60 (83.3%)	12 (16.7%)		
Slightly Liberal	31 (79.5%)	8 (20.5%)		
Moderate	9 (56.3%)	7 (43.8%)		
Slightly Conservative	22 (75.9%)	7 (24.1%)		
Very Conservative	15 (75.0%)	5 (25.0%)		

DV: Change of Vote (n = 42)

Primary Source of Election Information and the Influence of Media on Political Decisions

Table 3.5 illustrates descriptive statistics for the primary source of information variable. This variable demonstrates which sources of information were identified as being each respondent's primary source of information for finding or coming across information regarding election issues. This table also explores whether associations are present between primary election information type and the dependent variable. There is no significant relationship between primary source of information and CV. 62.1% of all respondents primarily rely on the internet for election information (n = 118). Those who changed their vote due to media influence are represented highest within the internet information category (n = 22, 52.4%). These internet sources do not include social media platforms¹⁸. Only 1.58% of respondents primarily depend on printed newspapers for their election data (n = 3). Social media is the second most utilized source (n = 41) as 21.6%

¹⁸ Non-social media internet sources typically include online news articles, party websites, and opinion editorials.

of respondents identified that social media platforms are where they primarily consume election-related information.

Table 3.5 Descriptive Statistics for Primary Source of Election Information

Primary Source of Information	Change of Vote Status		$\chi^2 (p)$	Phi Cramer's V
	Vote Not Changed	Vote Changed		
Television	10 (83.3%)	2 (16.7%)	.27	.23
Social Media	27 (65.9%)	14 (34.1%)		
Internet (not including social media platforms)	96 (81.4%)	22 (18.6%)		
Radio	2 (66.7%)	1 (18.6%)		
Newspaper (printed)	2 (66.7%)	1 (18.6%)		
Magazine	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)		
Family and Friends	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)		
Brochures in Mail	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)		
Emails Sent on Behalf of Political Party	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)		
Telephone Callers	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)		

DV: Change of Vote

Media Usage Habits and the Influence of Media on Political Decisions

Table 3.6 represents descriptive information for social media usage habit variables. The platforms examined are Twitter ($n = 190$, $SD = .85$, $Mean = .76$), Facebook ($n = 190$, $SD = 1.05$, $Mean = 1.16$), Reddit ($n = 190$, $SD = 1.20$, $Mean = 1.88$), Tumblr ($n = 190$, $SD = .47$, $Mean = .13$) and Instagram ($n = 190$, $SD = 1.05$, $Mean = .98$). A Kruskal-Wallis test shows that the use of Facebook significantly affects whether a participant will decide to change their vote, $H(1) = 6.30$, $p = .01$. Of all 42 participants who changed their vote, 81% of them fall within the Facebook users group ($n = 34$). The majority of Facebook users who changed their vote, are online for less than 1 hour per day ($n = 14$) or for 1 to 2 hours per day ($n = 13$). This may suggest that the longer the participant spends online, the more likely they are to be exposed to more information which confirms their current electoral decision. The strength of association between these two variables is moderate. There are 8 participants who are not Facebook users that have still ultimately changed their mind due to other media influences. Given that a large majority of users who have changed their vote due to media influence and are

active Facebook suggests that Facebook can be a powerful tool to disseminate election-related information.

Another significant relationship is found between Instagram usage and CV. A Kruskal-Wallis test shows that Instagram has a significant relationship with the decision to change one's voting preference based on media influence, $H(1) = 16.33$, $p = .001$. The strength of association between these variables is strong. 37.4% of the entire sample use Instagram for less than one hour per day ($n = 71$). Of the participants who are active on Instagram for one hour or less, 16 users belong to the group that changed their voting decision. This accounts for 8.4% of the entire sample and 13.8% of all Instagram users ($n = 116$). 39% of participants are non-Instagram users ($n = 74$). Of the non-Instagram users, 10.8% of participants changed their vote based on media influence viewed elsewhere ($n = 8$).

The most frequently used social media platform is Reddit ($n = 155$). This is a likely result of the sampling procedure used during the data collection process which saw 87.7% of survey responses to be collected through Reddit survey advertisement URLs ($n = 270$). Tumblr is the least frequently used form of social media. Only 10% of the sample identified as being active on this platform ($n = 10$). After Reddit, Facebook is the most frequent platform used by all participants ($n = 133$). 70% of all respondents report to spend a specified amount of time daily on this platform. Instagram is the third most popular among participants ($n = 116$); however, it has the most significant association with the change of vote variable. 29.3% of users who are active on Instagram ultimately changed their election decision ($n = 34$). Similarly, 25.6% of all active Facebook users changed their voting outcome as well ($n = 34$). Both Facebook and Instagram have the highest frequency of participants who fall within the CV group; further, they both show a statistically significant association with CV. A participant who changed their vote and is active on Facebook and Instagram is likely to be reported within both categories. The bivariate matrix (Table 3.9) will illustrate potential relationships between social media platform usage to provide enhanced interpretation of this finding.

Table 3.6 Descriptive Statistics for Media Usage Habits

	Change of Vote Status		<i>Mea n</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>χ² (p)</i>	<i>Kruskal- Wallis</i>
	Vote Not Changed	Vote Changed				
Time Spent on Twitter			.76	.85	.88	.03
None	68 (78.2%)	19 (21.8%)				
Less than 1 hour	54 (76.1%)	17 (23.9%)				
1 to 2 hours	19 (79.2%)	5 (20.8%)				
2 to 3 hours	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)				
3 to 4 hours	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
More than 4 hours	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
Time Spent on Facebook			1.16	1.05	.01*	6.30
None	49 (86.0%)	8 (14.0%)				
Less than 1 hour	60 (81.1%)	14 (18.9%)				
1 to 2 hours	22 (62.9%)	13 (37.1%)				
2 to 3 hours	16 (80.0%)	4 (20.0%)				
3 to 4 hours	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)				
More than 4 hours	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)				
Time Spent on Reddit			1.88	1.20	.58	.31
None	22 (62.9%)	13 (37.1%)				
Less than 1 hour	24 (82.8%)	5 (17.2%)				
1 to 2 hours	55 (87.3%)	8 (12.7%)				
2 to 3 hours	38 (77.6%)	11 (22.4%)				
3 to 4 hours	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)				
More than 4 hours	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
Time Spent on Tumblr			.13	.47	.10	2.80
None	136 (79.5%)	35 (20.5%)				
Less than 1 hour	6 (46.2%)	7 (53.8%)				
1 to 2 hours	4 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
2 to 3 hours	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
3 to 4 hours	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
More than 4 hours	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)				
Time Spent on Instagram			.98	1.05	.00**	16.33
None	66 (89.2%)	8 (10.8%)				
Less than 1 hour	55 (77.5%)	16 (22.5%)				
1 to 2 hours	19 (79.2%)	5 (20.8%)				
2 to 3 hours	8 (50.0%)	8 (50.0%)				
3 to 4 hours	0 (0.0%)	5 (100.0%)				
More than 4 hours	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)				

DV: Change of Vote.

*p < 0.01, **p < 0.001.

Real News and Fake News Headlines and the Influence of Media on Political Decisions

Table 3.7 reveals the descriptive information of the headline variables and their association to the decision to make a change in the final election voting decision. Fake news headlines appear to have a more significant relationship with the dependent variable^{19 20}. A significant relationship is seen within fake news headline 3 ($\Phi = .18, p < .01$) and fake news headline 4 ($\Phi = .24, p < .001$). None of the real news headlines have a significant relationship with CV. Fake news headlines 1 and 2 appear to have no association with the decision to change one's voting outcome during the election. The most common headline that was seen by survey respondents during the time of the election was real news 1 ($n = 119$) as 62.6% of all participants recalled seeing this news item reported²¹. The least common headline recalled by survey respondents during the time of the election is fake news 3 ($n = 32$) as only 16.8% of all participants remember coming across this headline. Interestingly, despite being the least commonly recalled headline, it shows a significant relationship with CV.

Of all confirmed news headline recalls²² ($n = 476$), real news headlines account for 59.5% of respondent confirmed recalls and fake news headlines account for 40.5% of all respondent confirmed recalls. This suggests that the real news headlines included in this survey were seen more frequently or in a larger-scale circulation than the fake news headlines. Fake news 2 was seen by 38.4% of the sample ($n = 73$). Of the participants who recall seeing this headline, 27.4% of them belong to the CV group ($n = 20$). While this headline shows to have no significant association to CV, fake news 2 shows the highest frequency of changed votes across all fake news headlines²³.

¹⁹ Fake news 3 states, "RCMP source says 'security risk' against Trudeau was contrived by PMO staffers" – The Buffalo Chronicle (Oct 15, 2019)

²⁰ Fake news 4 states, "Elections Canada attempts to combat huge number of non-Canadians on voting register" – The Post Millennial (Oct 6, 2019)

²¹ Real news 1 states, "Singh says NDP would form coalition with the Liberals to stop Tories" – CTV News (Oct 13, 2019)

²² Participants are likely to have viewed multiple headlines which is demonstrated in this frequency of reported headline recalls.

²³ Fake news 2 states, "RCMP plans to charge Trudeau with obstruction in SNC Lavalin affair, following federal elections" – The Buffalo Chronicle (Oct 17, 2019)

Table 3.7 Descriptive Statistics for Headline Variables

	Change of Vote Status		$\chi^2 (p)$	<i>Phi</i> <i>Cramer's V</i>
	Vote Not Changed	Vote Changed		
Real News 1			.33	.07
No	58 (81.7%)	13 (18.3%)		
Yes	90 (75.6%)	29 (23.4%)		
Real News 2			.35	.07
No	112 (79.4%)	29 (20.6)		
Yes	35 (73.0%)	13 (27.0%)		
Real News 3			.88	-.01
No	92 (78%)	26 (22%)		
Yes	56 (78.9%)	15 (21.1%)		
Real News 4			.67	.03
No	114 (78.6%)	31 (21.4%)		
Yes	34 (75.6%)	11 (24.4%)		
Fake News 1			.19	.10
No	104 (80.6%)	25 (19.4%)		
Yes	44 (72.1%)	17 (27.9%)		
Fake News 2			.17	.10
No	95 (81.2%)	22 (18.8%)		
Yes	53 (72.6%)	20 (27.4%)		
Fake News 3			.01*	.18
No	132 (81.0%)	31 (19.0%)		
Yes	16 (59.3%)	11 (40.7%)		
Fake News 4			.00**	.24
No	130 (82.3%)	28 (17.7%)		
Yes	18 (56.3%)	14 (43.7%)		

DV: Change of Vote.

* $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$.

The Perceived Truth of Real News and Fake News Headlines and the Influence of Media on Political Decisions

Table 3.8 illustrates descriptive information for the perceived truth of headline variables and their association to the decision being made by the participant to change their vote based on media influence. A significant relationship can be found between the perceived truth of fake news 2 ($\Phi = .22$, $p < .01$), fake news 3 ($\Phi = .28$, $p < .001$), and fake news 4 ($\Phi = .24$, $p < .001$). All perceived truth of real news variables shows to

have no significant association with CV. Within the fake news headlines, fake news 1²⁴ observed the highest frequency and highest percentage of participants estimating that the headline was true. Of the 61 respondents who report to have observed seeing fake news 1, 45.9% (n = 28) of those participants believed it to be true; however, this variable shows no statistically significant relationship to CV. Fake news 4 represents the second highest percentage of truth belief among the fake news headline as 37.5% of participants who recall seeing the headline, believe that the headline is true (n = 12). The perceived truth of fake news 2 (n = 24, 32.9%) and fake news 3 (n = 6, 22.2%) rank third and fourth respectively in highest percentage of truth belief among the fake news headlines.

In relation to CV, fake news 4 ranks first in the highest percentage of respondents who meet the criteria for believing in the fake news article and falling within the change of vote group (n = 8, 25%). At 18.5%, fake news 2 is ranked second highest within the CV and belief of truth group. The perceived truth of fake news 3 (n = 11, 15.1%) and fake news 4 (n = 9, 14.6%) are ranked third and fourth respectively in highest percentage of those who believed the headlines to be true and belong within the CV group.

While the perceived truth of real news headlines show no statistical significance in relation to CV, it is interesting to note that the average percentage of participants who do not believe that the real news headlines are true is 20.3%. This suggests that on average, approximately 20% of readers may be critical regarding the validity of legitimate news content. In comparison, the average percentage of those who disbelieved the fake news headlines is 65.6%; this appears to be drastically higher when compared to disbelief of real news articles. This may suggest that consumers who come across fictitious news media are on average 1.9 times more likely to conclude that the disinformation articles are untrue.

²⁴ Fake news 1 states, “Justin Trudeau is trying to rig the election through controlling the Canadian news media” – Canada Proud (Oct 12, 2019)

Table 3.8 Descriptive Statistics for the Perceived Truth of Headline Variables

	Change of Vote Status		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>χ² (p)</i>	<i>Phi Cramer's V</i>
	Vote Not Changed	Vote Changed				
Perceived Truth of Real News 1			1.25	.66	.59	.08
Did Not Believe	18 (78.3%)	5 (21.7%)				
Believed	72 (75.0%)	24 (25.0%)				
Did Not See	58 (81.7%)	13 (18.3%)				
Perceived Truth of Real News 2			1.72	.51	.58	.08
Did Not Believe	4 (80.0%)	1 (20%)				
Believed	31 (72.1%)	12 (27.9%)				
Did Not See	113 (79.6%)	29 (20.4%)				
Perceived Truth of Real News 3			1.55	.63	.77	.05
Did Not Believe	12 (85.7%)	2 (14.3%)				
Believed	44 (77.2%)	13 (22.8%)				
Did Not See	92 (77.3%)	27 (22.7%)				
Perceived Truth of Real News 4			1.69	.60	.44	.09
Did Not Believe	12 (85.7%)	2 (14.3%)				
Believed	21 (70.0%)	9 (30.0%)				
Did Not See	115 (78.8%)	31 (21.2%)				
Perceived Truth of Fake News 1			1.51	.78	.32	.11
Did Not Believe	25 (75.8%)	8 (24.2%)				
Believed	19 (67.9%)	9 (32.1%)				
Did Not See	104 (80.6%)	25 (19.4%)				
Perceived Truth of Fake News 2			1.36	.87	.01*	.22
Did Not Believe	40 (81.6)	9 (18.4%)				
Believed	13 (54.2%)	11 (45.8%)				
Did Not See	95 (81.2%)	22 (18.8%)				
Perceived Truth of Fake News 3			1.75	.64	.00**	.28
Did Not Believe	15 (71.4%)	6 (28.6%)				
Believed	1 (16.7%)	5 (83.3%)				
Did Not See	132 (81.0%)	31 (19.0%)				
Perceived Truth of Fake News 4			1.73	.64	.00**	.24
Did Not Believe	12 (60.0%)	8 (40.0%)				
Believed	6 (50.0%)	6 (50.0%)				
Did Not See	130 (82.3%)	28 (17.7%)				

DV: Change of Vote

*p < 0.01, **p < 0.001.

3.4. Bivariate Matrix Analysis

3.4.1. Demographic Variables

Table 3.9 displays measures of association between all the independent variables. Among the demographic variables, strong effect sizes were found between education and gender ($\Phi = .40, p < .001$), and education and age ($H(4) = 36.2, p = .001$). The relationship between education and age is expected because as people get older, they are more likely to participate in further education opportunities. The relationship between education and gender may suggest that based on a participant's identified gender (male, female, or gender queer/non-binary) there may be a relationship with the type and level of education they pursue. Another significant association is found between number of languages spoken and gender ($\Phi = .33, p < .001$) and number of languages spoken and education ($\Phi = .25, p < .001$).

3.4.2. Political Affiliation

Within political affiliation, strong effect sizes were found with the primary source of election information ($\Phi = .26, p < .01$) and fake news 1 ($\Phi = .29, p < .01$). Further, this may suggest that, based on the participant's identified political affiliation, their affiliation may have contributed to their exposure to fake news 1. Additional strong associations within the political affiliation variable can be found between political affiliation and the perceived truth of fake news 1 ($\Phi = .36, p < .001$), the perceived truth of fake news 2 ($\Phi = .27, p < .01$), the perceived truth of fake news 3 ($\Phi = .23, p < .05$), and the perceived truth of fake news 4 ($\Phi = .24, p < .01$). This illustrates that those who indicate a certain political preference may be more likely to believe that fake news articles depict truthful facts.

3.4.3. Social Media Usage

Within the social media usage habit variables, there appears to be a strong association among all platforms. The strongest association is found between time spent on Facebook and time spent on Instagram ($r(20) = .28, p < .001$). Given the strength of association, this suggests that those who are active on Facebook are also active on Instagram. Primary source of information also shares a significant relationship with both

the time spent on Facebook ($H(8) = 15.64, p = .05$) and time the user spends on Instagram ($H(8) = 20.03, p = .01$). Additionally, strong effect sizes can be seen among time spent on Facebook and fake news 1 ($H(1) = 7.99, p = .01$), fake news 2 ($H(1) = 6.54, p = .01$) and fake news 4 ($H(1) = 7.63, p = .01$) as well as the perceived truth of each those headlines. Fake news 3 did not appear to show any significant relationship with the amount of time users spend on Facebook. Similarly, Instagram indicates that it is strongly related with fake news 4 ($H(1) = 12.54, p = .001$) and the perceived truth of fake news 4 ($H(2) = 12.86, p = .01$).

Given the relationships that exist among each of these variables, it is likely that within this sample, those who use Facebook are also likely to be active on Instagram. Further, as these platforms are positively associated with primary source of information, participants who use Facebook and Instagram are likely to rely on these platforms as their primary source for election-related information. Given the strong relationships between Facebook and Instagram with the fake news variables, there appears to be an association with exposure to fake news through these outlets. As demonstrated in Table 3.6, the time spent on Facebook and the time spent on Instagram are related to the participant's eventual change to their voting outcome. Given the association among all of the variables reported, it is plausible that time spent on Facebook and Instagram can increase exposure to disinformation which can be associated with an influence to change the voting outcome.

As illustrated in Table 3.9, all fake news articles are strongly inter-related among each other and among the perceived truth of each fake news article. Real news 1 shows to have significant relationships with fake news 2 ($\Phi = .19, p < .01$), fake news 3 ($\Phi = .22, p < .001$), and fake news 4 ($\Phi = .14, p < .05$). This suggests that media consumers are exposed to a variety of information which include legitimate media and fake news media. The factors involved in the consumer's ability to infer what is accurate and what is misleading is unclear.

Table 3.9 Bivariate Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1. Gender	–																											
2. Age	1.26	–																										
3. Level of Education	.40***	36.2***	–																									
4. Household Income	4.41	.06	4.58	–																								
5. Number of Languages Spoken	.33***	2.35	.25***	2.91	–																							
6. Political Affiliation	.21	6.73	.19	2.10	.15	–																						
7. Time Spent on Twitter	4.24	-.06	5.19	-.05	.03	7.43	–																					
8. Time Spent on Facebook	2.30	.02	2.74	-.12	4.35	9.28	.17*	–																				
9. Time Spent on Reddit	5.44	-.14	6.02	.11	2.55	5.21	.13	-.11	–																			
10. Time Spent on Tumblr	8.45*	-.11	10.59*	-.09	1.70	1.25	.20**	.11	.03	–																		
11. Time Spent on Instagram	3.11	-.37	-.07	-.07	1.76	7.54	.25***	.28***	.04	.07	–																	
12. Primary Source of Information	.20	17.64*	.22	8.39	.17	.26**	9.71	15.64*	10.98	6.71	20.03**	–																
13. Real News 1	.24	.43	.11	2.93	.19	.18	.57	1.23	1.25	4.88*	.71	.20	–															
14. Real News 2	.12	.29	.09	.67	.06	.16	.01	.90	3.93*	.12	1.32	.14	.10	–														
15. Real News 3	.28***	.65	.14	.00	.10	.19	1.90	.56	5.54*	5.90*	.06	.16	.11	.12	–													
16. Real News 4	.05	.08	.05	.31	.17	.14	.88	2.24	2.55	.55	4.56*	.19	.08	.37***	.05	–												
17. Fake News 1	.18*	1.31	.07	1.17	.11	.29**	.20	7.99**	1.35	.93	3.01	.14	.11	.15*	.40***	.02	–											
18. Fake News 2	.01	2.04	.06	1.04	.18	.20	.48	6.54**	6.33**	.37	1.00	.16	.19**	.06	.13	.04	.31***	–										
19. Fake News 3	.07	1.95	.20	.34	.11	.10	2.42	3.04	2.85	.15	3.51	.15	.22***	.14*	.28***	.01	.37***	.33***	–									
20. Fake News 4	.08	1.74	.05	.19	.07	.19	.02	7.63**	.96	1.44	12.54***	.26	.14*	.10	.19**	.05	.41***	.38***	.34***	–								
21. Perceived Truth of Real News 1	.17*	.61	.09	2.30	.14	.16	3.61	1.34	1.28	4.94	1.85	.20	1.00***	.10	.11	.15	.11	.19*	.22**	.15	–							
22. Perceived Truth of Real News 2	.08	.47	.11	.67	.10	.21	.06	2.76	4.02	.55	1.15	.12	.21*	1.00***	.13	.41***	.17	.07	.18*	.14	.15	–						
23. Perceived Truth of Real News 3	.21	4.52	.11	1.81	.20*	.22	2.65	.67	5.77	8.32*	.24	.18	.19*	.18	1.00***	.13	.40***	.14	.30***	.20*	.15	.16	–					
24. Perceived Truth of Real News 4	.08	1.51	.12	.73	.21**	.14	1.47	3.37	1.91	1.58	5.57	.16	.25**	.35***	.04	1.00***	.07	.07	.13	.07	.21***	.33***	.17*	–				
25. Perceived Truth of Fake News 1	.14	1.34	.06	1.43	.10	.36***	.67	8.36*	2.31	1.87	.10	.18	.13	.15	.40***	.05	1.00***	.31***	.37***	.41***	.15	.13	.30	.06	–			
26. Perceived Truth of Fake News 2	.11	2.24	.10	1.15	.13	.27**	4.46	10.77**	6.55*	8.82**	1.71	.16	.19*	.18*	.13	.09	.35***	1.00***	.33***	.43***	.19**	.13	.10	.13	.32***	–		
27. Perceived Truth of Fake News 3	.05	2.47	.16	.57	.14	.23*	2.77	3.14	11.57**	.34	5.58	.17	.23**	.15	.27***	.30	.38***	.33***	1.00***	.35***	.19**	.13	.31***	.09	.40***	.32***	–	
28. Perceived Truth of Fake News 4	.70	1.93	.12	.45	.12	.24**	1.38	9.11**	1.61	8.01*	12.86**	.26	.15	.15	.19*	.40	.42***	.37***	.37***	1.00***	.14	.13	.16*	.08	.37***	.36***	.39***	–

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Continuous x continuous contains Kruskal-Wallis H. Continous x categorical contains Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Categorical x categorical contains Phi or Cramer's V

3.5. Binary Logistic Regression Analysis

3.5.1. Sub-Research Question 1

Sub-Research Question 1: Do social media platforms effect whether a participant will decide to change their vote?

Hypothesis 1: It is predicted that the use of social media will influence political decisions. As social media becomes more readily available and enables users to engage with news and informational content with increased speed and efficiency, it is hypothesized that exposure to social media will contribute to a participant's change of mind about the original party they intended to vote for.

To determine whether the usage of social media platforms has an effect on if a participant decides to change their voting decision, a binary logistic regression was used to analyze whether time spent on Reddit has an effect on the likelihood that a participant will decide to change their vote. As all social media time usage variables are not regularly distributed, time was manipulated to be categorical through dummy coding. All time dummy codes of time spent on Reddit are included in the model as predictor variables and gender is used as a control variable. Binary logistic regression analysis for the time spent on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram could not be conducted as there were too few observations where the participant was active on the social media platform and satisfied the dependent variable.

The full logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 11.19$, $p < .05$, and correctly predicted 77.9% of cases. The Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test is insignificant suggesting the model is a good fit. A minimal effect size was found (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .36$). A significant result was found among those who spend 1 to 2 hours on Reddit ($B = -1.43$, $p < .05$). This suggests that participants who spend 1 to 2 hours on Reddit have a decreased chance that they will change their vote based on media influence by a factor of .24. Simply stated, Reddit users who spend 1 to 2 hours daily on Reddit are less likely to change their voting decision. This suggests that social media usage may affect whether a participant decides to change their vote or not to change their vote. As Reddit requires that users subscribe to sub-Reddits which interest them, there is the possibility that Reddit users are experiencing the results of social media created echo chambers which further validate their current perspectives and ideologies (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). The null hypothesis is rejected as the usage of

social media can be a predictor for the chance that a participant will decide to change their vote; however, a larger sample would allow further analysis into social media usage on other platforms and how it may influence political decisions.

Table 3.10 Binary Logistic Regression: Social Media Usage Predicting Change of Vote

Social Media Usage	
	Reddit <i>B (OR)</i>
Gender (Man)	-.50 (.60)
None	-.16 (.86)
Less than 1 hour	-1.06 (.35)
1 to 2 hours	-1.43 (.24)*
2 to 3 hours	-.77 (.47)
3 to 4 hours	–
More than 4 hours	–
Constant	-.17 (.85)
Overall % predicted	77.9
χ^2	11.19*
Pseudo-R ²	.08

* $p < .05$

Reference category for gender is *all others*. Reference for time is *yes (1)*.

3.5.2. Sub-Research Question 2

Sub-Research Question 2: Does real news have an effect on whether a participant will change their vote?

Hypothesis 2: It is predicted that exposure to real news will increase the probability that a participant will change their mind about their election decision. Articles that depict accurate information are likely to provide information regarding the election that consumers rely on to remain informed regarding election issues of interest. It is likely that reading reliable new articles will affect their voting decision.

To answer the question whether real news will predict the likelihood that a participant will change their vote, a binary logistic regression was conducted. The model includes all real news headlines as predictor variables and the control variable is gender. The Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic is insignificant which supports this model's fit. There are no statistically significant findings within any of the real news predictors. The null

hypothesis is accepted. The real news predictors in this study do not increase or decrease the chance that a participant will be influenced to change their voting decision. Inclusion of more real news variables may prove valuable for further analysis.

Table 3.11 Binary Logistic Regression: Exposure to Real News Predicting Change of Vote

	Real News <i>B (OR)</i>
Gender (Man)	-.71 (.49)
Real News 1	.40 (1.50)
Real News 2	.28 (1.32)
Real News 3	.07 (1.07)
Real News 4	.11 (1.12)
Constant	-1.23 (.29)
Overall % predicted	78.2
χ^2	5.18
Pseudo-R ²	.04

Reference category for gender is *all other*.
Reference category for real news variables is *yes*.

3.5.3. Sub-Research Question 3

Sub-Research Question 3: Does reading fake news have an effect on whether a participant will change their vote?

Hypothesis 3: It is hypothesized that exposure to fake news will influence change voter's political decisions. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) note that fake news articles are becoming increasingly wide-spread. Fake news items are a cheaper alternative to reliable information media. As more people become exposed to misinformation and disinformation, this may influence their decision.

To explore whether exposure to fake news may be used as a predictor to determine the chance that a participant may change their vote based on media influence, a binary logistic regression was conducted where change of vote is the dependent variable, all fake news headlines are used as predictor variables, and gender is included as a control variable.

The full logistic regression model is statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 15.13$, $p < .01$, and correctly predicts 80% of cases. The Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test is insignificant suggesting the model is a good fit. A minimal effect size was found

(Nagelkerke $R^2 = .12$). A significant result was found among those who recall reading fake news 4 ($B = 1.20, p < .05$). This finding could suggest that participants who recall reading fake news 4 are more likely to change their vote than participants who did not see fake news 4 by a factor of 3.31. Neither of the other fake news headlines report any effect on the ability to predict the outcome of the DV. Based on this finding, the null hypothesis is rejected. Hypothesis 3 is confirmed as, depending on the article, fake news headlines may influence readers to change their election decisions.

Table 3.12 Binary Logistic Regression: Exposure to Fake News Predicting Change of Vote

	Fake News <i>B (OR)</i>
Gender (Man)	-.73 (.48)
Fake News 1	-.04 (.96)
Fake News 2	-.09 (.92)
Fake News 3	.76 (2.15)
Fake News 4	1.20 (3.31)*
Constant	-1.15 (.32)
Overall % predicted	80%
χ^2	15.13**
Pseudo- R^2	.12

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Reference category for gender is *all other*.

Reference for fake news is *yes (1)*.

3.5.4. Sub-Research Question 4

Sub-Research Question 4: Does believing fake news have an effect on whether a participant will change their vote?

Hypothesis 4: It is hypothesized that those who believe fake news articles to be true are more likely to be influenced politically. Consumers are exposed to an increased number of fake news articles which makes it more difficult to infer what information is accurate and what is misleading or untrue (Carlson, 2018). It is predicted that those who believe the truth of deceptive media are likely to be persuaded to vote differently.

To understand whether believing fake news headlines can be used as a predictor to determine the chance that a participant may change their vote based on media influence, a binary logistic regression was conducted. In this regression, change of vote

is the dependent variable, all perceived truth of fake news variables are used as predictor variables, and gender is included as a control variable.

The full logistic regression model is statistically significant, $\chi^2(9) = 22.66$, $p < .01$, and correctly predicts 77.9% of cases (Table 3.13). The Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test is insignificant suggesting that the model is a good fit. A minimal effect size was found (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .17$). A significant result was found among those who believed that fake news 3 is true ($B = 2.89$, $p < .01$). This finding could suggest that participants who believe that fake news 3 is true are more likely to change their vote than participants who do not interpret the headline as true by a factor of 17.9. Based on this finding, the null hypothesis is rejected. Believing that fictitious news is accurate can predict whether a participant may change their vote due to the influence of the media.

Table 3.13 Binary Logistic Regression: The Perceived Truth of Fake News Predicting Change of Vote

	Perceived Truth of Fake News B (OR)
Gender (Man)	-.66 (.51)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 1 (No)	-.07 (.93)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 1 (Yes)	-.46 (.50)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 2 (No)	-.39 (.44)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 2 (Yes)	.59 (1.81)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 3 (No)	.47 (1.59)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 3 (Yes)	2.89 (17.90)*
Perceived Truth of Fake News 4 (No)	.94 (2.56)
Perceived Truth of Fake News 4 (Yes)	1.13 (3.09)
Constant	-1.14 (3.09)
Overall % predicted	77.9
χ^2	22.66*
Pseudo- R^2	.17

* $p < .01$

Reference category for gender is *all othr*. Reference category for fake news is yes.

Study 1 has provided evidence that fake news headlines can have a significant influence on how a participant decides to vote. Sub-research question 3 has illustrated that being exposed to certain fake news headlines can affect whether a participant will decide to change their voting decision. Sub-research question 4 has shown that

believing in certain fake news headlines can also influence whether a participant will change their voting outcome. Based on the relationships which exist between political affiliation and the exposure to fake news headlines, there is evidence that may suggest that those who indicate a certain political preference may be more likely to believe in the authenticity of fake news articles. As there are further strong relationships to be observed between Facebook and the fake news articles, Facebook is likely to be a significant provider of false information media. Algorithms used by Facebook generate the content that a user will see and engage with on their newsfeed (Bakir and McStay, 201). As Facebook appears to be associated with the exposure to fake news, the algorithms responsible for generating the content that the user is exposed to may play a significant role in the propagation of fake news materials.

3.6. Limitations

Due to the small sample size, there are a variety of limitations which may result. One of the main disadvantages is the increased chance for a type II error. A type II error occurs when the null hypothesis is false, but it has failed to be rejected. This could suggest that due to a small sample size, an effect exists but the ability for the sample to capture that effect is limited by the number of participants. Further, as the sample was recruited through social media, with the majority of respondents being recruited from Reddit, the sample may not be representative of the overall Canadian voting population. It may also not be representative of the overall population of Canadian voters who use social media. Including more real news and fake news articles may have been beneficial for improving the quality of the findings. By including more options for articles that respondents may have been exposed to, there may have been an article present that was viewed by more survey respondents which would have contributed to more significant findings. Another issue faced is related to the classification of news items. The news items could have been classified inaccurately; this is to say that, there may be news which was coded as real that may not be fully accurate. Further, there may also be news items which were coded as fake, but there may be undiscovered truth behind them.

Another limitation of this research relates to the generalizability of this research's findings. Due to the small sample size and as a result of not following a randomized sampling method, the ability to generalize outside of this sample is extremely limited.

This research is effective in showing that within the sample, participants did change their voting decision based on fake news articles observed; however, this effect cannot be generalized to the broader population. Additionally, there are likely confounding variables at play. It is unlikely that participants changed their voting decision based on the one article they were exposed to alone. Additional factors such as a person's upbringing, their family unit, the influence of friends or role models, their school or working environment, and additional psychological factors are also likely to influence a change of decision. This research does show that fake news can influence a participant's voting decision, but the generalizability of this statement is limited by sample size, sampling method, and the consideration of confounding variables.

Chapter 4.

Study 2 – Qualitative Analysis

4.1. Content Analysis of Fake News Articles

4.1.1. Data Collection – Web Crawling

A content analysis was implemented to analyze 596 fake news pieces. The fake news articles were collected through a web crawler application. The goal of a web crawling program is to automate the collection of data and resources that are hosted on the internet (Grega, Glowacz, Anzel, Lach, & Musia, 2014). If a researcher were to collect each available post, website, article, image, video, link, and so forth without the use of an automated tool to assist in their data collection process, they may spend hours, days, months, or years collecting the data necessary for their research. Web crawler applications enable large amounts of data to be withdrawn from internet sources and stored for later use. Web crawler architecture consists of several components (Grega, et al., 2011). Website crawlers, which are the central feature of the program, are composed of the crawling engine and the crawlers. Crawlers are responsible for the actual collection of the data. They analyze and interpret website coding, detect links, detect media, and then they take that information and report back to the crawling engine. The crawling engine serves as the crawler's director. The engine directs the crawlers on which domains to focus on and which domains to avoid. They also instruct the crawlers about what type of data they should collect or not to collect. Once an item of interest is found by the crawling engine, it is downloaded to a plugin. The system operator asks these plugins to perform various tasks based on the goals of the data collection (Grega, et al., 2014). The web crawling program used in this research is The Dark Crawler.

The Dark Crawler program was instructed to collect data from websites that have been known to generate misinformation and disinformation about issues in the Canadian political climate. The headline of the article or title of the post was collected by the application. The crawler did not collect the full text body of each article as the full article was often included as a referenced link which the crawler was not tasked to include. A web search engine was used to locate the full article by inputting the headline captured

by the crawling engine into the search engine. The article where the headline was used came up as the first item for each search. Once a dataset was generated by The Dark Crawler program, the researcher went through the data set to determine which cases were relevant to the research. To be included for analysis, the researcher examined whether the date the article was within the specified date range. The Canadian Federal election took place on October 21st, 2019. Any post that occurred during the 6-month period from April 21st, 2019 to October 21st, 2019 were included for further analysis. Posts generated from two main sources of false information were analyzed. These sources are *The Buffalo Chronicle* and Canada Proud. 20 headlines from *The Buffalo Chronicle* were examined. 596 title posts were examined from the Canada Proud Facebook page²⁵. *The Buffalo Chronicle* analysis included all headlines that were collected by The Dark Crawler. The crawler generated 975 Canada Proud posts. The researcher removed 399 cases that were posted before or after the 6-month period from the analysis.

4.1.2. Analytic Strategy

The file containing the raw fake news dataset was imported into Microsoft Excel. Once the data was cleaned into a workable set (removing unrecognizable characters, blank cases, and unnecessary columns), the file was then imported into NVivo.

Content analysis is beneficial for this study as it enables to researcher to identify intentions, focus, or communication trends within the content data provided by individuals, groups, or institutions. As this research is an exploratory study, this qualitative research method is advantageous as it enables the researcher the ability to describe the attitudinal or behavioural responses that occur within the communication method, reveal patterns and trends, and assist to uncover the emotional and psychological states that occur within the groups of interest (Columbia University, 2019). In exploring the content found within texts, researchers are able to draw inferences about the message that is being conveyed, the audience it may intend to attract, and the culture that may be connected to the content (Columbia University, 2019).

²⁵ As Facebook posts are far more abundant than online journal articles, this is why only 20 Buffalo Chronicle articles were analyzed in comparison to 596 Canada Proud Facebook posts

Content analysis requires the researcher to analyze language and word usage within text. Themes which occur in the data are then attached to the texts through consistency and connection (Neuendorf, 2016). The primary goal of content analysis is to take large amounts of texts and transform them into a concise summary of thematic results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The qualitative content analysis follows the data abstraction process as outlined by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). The researcher first read over the first 50 texts to become familiar with the type of information conveyed in the posts. Once basic-level familiarity was established, condensed meaning units were created. Meaning units condense the text into more workable pieces while still preserving the meaning found within the text. As the messages became more concise, the researcher was able to assign them a code. Codes serve as labels which help to organize texts into their related subgroups. Codes were then organized into categories; codes were grouped together into overarching categories based on their similarities to each other through related content. From these categories, themes were extracted based on the deep interpretation of the data.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. The Buffalo Chronicle Findings

596 fake news pieces were qualitatively analyzed using content analysis. 20 of the pieces captured by the crawling engine were created by *The Buffalo Chronicle*. As the text captured by the crawler was not the article's headline but rather a sentence which can be found later in the article, the content analysis included analyzing the entire body of each article rather than simply the sentence of text captured in the dataset to create a more detailed analysis.

The Buffalo Chronicle is an independent journalism platform based in Buffalo, New York. The Buffalo Chronicle Media Group has attracted considerable negative attention as they are considered to have, “frequently published false and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, often aimed at left-leaning politicians” (News Guard Tech, 2020, pp. 1). Through qualitative analysis of all 2019 Canadian Federal election-related posts, which were captured by the crawling engine and posted during the 6-month period from April 21st, 2019 to October 21st, 2019, various themes emerge. The first major theme uncovered involves the use of trigger topics as an attention grabber

and mechanism to deliver the intended narrative. The second major theme relates to the tendency to use accurate and verified information combined with opinion, speculation, and unverifiable facts to further provide additional substance to their message.

Finding 1: Trigger Topics

Within the 20 pieces of fake news content analyzed, each article utilized a controversial topic to be the basis of the article's foundation. Once the trigger topic is established as the article's main foundation, the remainder of the piece develops the further story, often using speculation and unverified information (although not in all cases) to extend the story's commentary. The foundational topics discussed tend to be centred around issues that are often sensitive or emotionable. The main trigger topics embedded in the articles are the SNC Lavalin Scandal, the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and sexual misconduct.

The SNC Lavalin Scandal

In a Buffalo Chronicle article called, "'Deep and penetrating' relationship may taint Butts' testimony" (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, March 6)²⁶ an examination of Trudeau's friendship with Gerald Butts²⁷ is conducted. Besides the implied sexual relationship between Trudeau and Butts as depicted in the headline, the remainder of the article continues to illustrate a picture of corruption within the Liberal government, without naming it as such. An unnamed source from McGill allegedly states that,

"Justin Trudeau and Gerald Butts had the kind of 'deep and penetrating' relationship that is common among privileged young men in their late teens and early twenties: lofty in their aspirations, pedestrian in their work ethic, and, at times, ambiguous in their orientation" (para 2).

The information conveyed by the unnamed source begins to bring into question the credibility and work ethic of the two political actors through describing the details of their friendship during young adulthood while attending university. In considering the sexual innuendo contained in the headline, the mention of 'ambiguous in their orientation' can be interpreted to suggest that the unnamed source of is inferring a

²⁶ While this article falls outside of the 6-month period, the headline was reposted on the *Buffalo Chronicle's* social media platform during the 6-month window. This may illustrate an attempt to amplify the message of the article during the election period.

²⁷ Gerald Butts is a political consultant. He served as the Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

sexual relationship between the two young men. It is also interesting to explore the words used by the source. The sexual innuendo implied in the headline is further integrated and amplified within the comment included by the unnamed source. This snippet of dialogue appears to further push the idea on the reader about the idea of sexual relationship between Trudeau and Butts.

The article further includes a suggestion related to deep-seeded corruption within the Liberal government through implying that the two men have long been working together to develop political schemes to get themselves ahead. A caption on a picture in the article where Trudeau and Butts can be seen in a park in exercise gear states that,

“Trudeau and Butts are long-time friends who work together, who exercise together, and who hatch political plans together.”

This excerpt indicates that the two ‘hatch’ political plans together. After the depiction of the two men, who are suggested to have a sexual relationship, is painted as having a close-knit bond characterized by minimal work ethic and high aspirations, this section of the article further implies that the two manifest political schemes together. The article further states without reference to a source that,

“Both undergraduates in the liberal arts, the two young men’s friendship grew from a shared a jovial disposition, left-leaning political views, and an occasional fondness for pairing the music of early-90s grunge with their favored varieties of marijuana” (para. 7).

In further characterization of both political figures, the article now references their left-wing political affiliations and engagement with marijuana culture while painting them as irresponsible young men. Following this illustrated characterization, the article begins to discuss their roles in the SNC Lavalin scandal. The news piece appears to bring into question the credibility of both men while inferring collusion through their roles in the SNC Lavalin. In describing their purported behaviours of their early 20s while relating it to a current day issue, their perceived political integrity as people in positions of authority decreases in the reader’s mind. Regardless of whether corruption has existed or does exist at the Federal level, the news piece is an effective psychological piece. Through the inclusion of information that is unverifiable, this article persuades the reader to accept a constructed reality which depicts the narrative of two young, reckless, and irresponsible young men who are now involved in large-scale corruption.

The Mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples

An article titled, “Federal spending on foreign abortions increased to \$700m, infuriating Canada’s Indigenous people” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, Sept 3) depicts a sensitive topic which remains to be an issue of concern for many Canadians across the country. While the federal spending announcement for foreign-aid spending for sexual, reproductive, maternal, and child health in countries where women’s rights are under attack is fact (Carber & Woo, 2019, June 19), the remainder of the article frames the issue in a partisan manner. The article mentions that, “according to a First Nations activist, Canada is paying \$700 million to kill the babies of Indigenous people around the world” (para. 2). The tone of this message appears to take on a pro-life stance on women’s reproductive rights while framing the issue within the topic of the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada. However, following this, the article takes a more factual turn as it progresses by noting that many Indigenous communities in Canada still do not have access to clean drinking water. In spending \$700 million in foreign aid, it is argued that the money could instead be spent locally to increase access to drinkable water among remote Indigenous communities.

Interestingly, all articles which are based on the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada use accurate information to convey the intended message. All articles which cover the other trigger topics contain far more opinion, speculation, and unverified facts. The common theme that appears within the articles which are based on the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples are that they take the experiences and concerns of Indigenous communities and then further relate that information to a broader political message. Rather than direct coverage about the issue in question, a political perspective is influenced within the overarching message that is delivered. For example, in the article referenced above, rather than exploring the alarming number of Indigenous communities who do not have access to clean drinking water, the support for the international reproductive rights of women become under scrutiny which further implicates the Liberal government to be the primary concern of the article. This then overpowers the coverage of the challenges that Indigenous communities experience by directing focus away from the systemic problems associated with the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Through forcing the reader’s attention towards a separate issue where the message is politically motivated, a desired conclusion is manipulated. The factual information about the marginalization of such communities may be used to attract

the reader to gain their trust, then through manipulation, a political leaning is influenced among the audience.

The respect for Indigenous communities within the articles created by *The Buffalo Chronicle* appears to be superficial. While coverage of the issues faced by Indigenous communities across Canada remains high, their terminology used shows an apparent lack of respect and consideration for the communities they are covering. One of the articles which focuses on the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada is titled, “Ontario judge riles an Indian community, as Rez Fox fleeces a revered civic leader” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2018, Jan 2)²⁸. The headline uses the term ‘Indian’ in describing an Indigenous community. The use of the word “Indian” to describe all Indigenous cultures and communities across North America was dubbed by early European colonizers. The term ‘Indian’ is oppressive as colonizers labelled all Indigenous peoples as one racial group while ignoring existing and individualized tribal identities, cultures, traditions, and languages. Reducing all Indigenous cultures and communities to one monolithic label imposes oppression and subordination on Indigenous communities and upholds the notion that Western identities are superior (Yellow Bird, 1999). The *Buffalo Chronicle* article continues to further use the label ‘Indian’ as a descriptor within the article by referring to lawyers who are versed in Indigenous legal issues as “indian lawyers” (para. 3) and by again referring to Indigenous communities as “indian communities” (para. 3). While the independent journal does highlight important issues that are experienced by Indigenous communities across Canada, their attention to these concerns appear superficial and are used to push a personal agenda.

Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct appears to be a theme which emerges from the nature of the *Buffalo Chronicle* articles which are explored. One article titled, “Costumes, roleplay whet a young Trudeau’s sexual appetite” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, Oct 12) states that,

²⁸ While this article falls outside of the 6-month period, the headline was reposted on the *Buffalo Chronicle*’s social media platform during the 6-month window. This may illustrate an attempt to amplify the message of the article during the election period.

“In his early to late-20s, Justin Trudeau had a robust and wide-ranging sexual appetite — most especially for costumes and role play, a former classmate tells *The Chronicle*” (para. 1).

In this quote, the unnamed source divulges into the alleged sexual interests of Trudeau through discussing his enjoyment of roleplay and costumes. Just one month before the 2019 Canadian Federal election, images surfaced of Trudeau from 2001 where the Prime Minister can be seen wearing an Aladdinesque style costume, with a turban, and with the inclusion of his face darkened with black paint while surrounded by four women (CBC News, 2019, Sept 20). Due to the disrespectful and racist nature of this costume, this understandably sparked considerable outrage across the country and became a significant source of media attention as Trudeau campaigned for re-election. The *Buffalo Chronicle* article discussed Trudeau’s sexual interest in costumes and roleplay. Following the widespread story of Trudeau’s previous controversial choice of costume, this article likely builds off the negative image that many readers already associate with Trudeau’s costumes. This article then takes this story a step further through suggesting that there are sexual motivations behind his dress-up choices.

As the article progresses, Trudeau is painted as a sex-crazy, marijuana smoking, mischief maker. Much like the article explored in the SNC Lavalin example, this article further emphasizes the narrative of Trudeau’s apparently reckless youth while progressing the anecdote to include tales of Trudeau’s sexual escapades. According to an unnamed former classmate, Trudeau is,

“...one of the coolest dudes you could ever party with, always the first to whip his dick out, so to speak (para. 8).”

The article later describes an alleged contest where Trudeau made it his mission to ejaculate on as many campus chalkboards as possible. The article uses the trigger topic of sexual misconduct to further develop a narrative where Trudeau is depicted as an irresponsible teenager. This is likely to invoke a sense of disgust and mistrust from the reader which may be used to discredit Trudeau as a reputable public figure. During election time, small inferences such as this can have significant consequences.

Finding 2: The Use of True Facts in Combination with Unverifiable or False Facts

Another common theme which emerged from the analysis of articles published by *The Buffalo Chronicle* was the inclusion of legitimate and verifiable facts combined

with opinion, facts that are not verifiable, and/or pure speculation. An article titled, “‘Political grandmaster’ Frank Iacobucci is at the center of SNC Lavalin, Kinder Morgan scandals” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, March 11), includes both factual information in combination with unverifiable fact and speculation as a means of message delivery. The article begins by including true facts regarding Iacobucci’s career including his service as a Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada until his retirement in 2004 (Peter A. Allard School of Law, 2020). The article continues on to state that,

“Suddenly, this week, nearly everyone in Ottawa wants him to testify before the House of Commons’ justice committee regarding his involvement in the SNC Lavalin scandal, following widespread rumors that it was Iacobucci who first insisted that Jody Wilson-Raybould be removed as Attorney General (para. 2).”

It can be confirmed that Wilson-Raybould, former Attorney General, was removed from her position and moved into the position of veteran’s affairs minister. Further, much speculation exists on the rationale behind Wilson-Raybould’s removal from her previous position (Zimonjic, 2019, Jan 14). Wilson-Raybould testified in the House of Commons on February 27th, 2019 regarding the SNC Lavalin scandal and her understanding about the corruption and bribery which occurred on behalf of the Liberal Government in their handling of SNC Lavalin. She noted in her testimony that, as Attorney General, she was included in discussions regarding the affair. She stated that during these discussions, she made it very clear that she would not participate in Trudeau’s backdoor motion to prevent SNC Lavalin from being prosecuted. She further included her concerns that she was being removed from the justice department for her decision to remain neutral (Thomson, 2019, Feb 28).

There is evidence to support corruption within the Liberal government; however, the *Buffalo Chronicle* article from March 11th, 2019 takes facts and dilutes it with speculation to progress the narrative further. The article even notes that through ‘widespread’ rumours, it was former Supreme Court Justice Iacobucci who insisted that Wilson-Raybould be removed as Attorney General. The headline further attempts to connect Iacobucci as a master political manipulator who is behind all Liberal government scandals without any significant evidence to support the claim. The article also mentions that, “a source close to the talks suspects that Trudeau had tasked Iacobucci with ‘essentially bribing’ every Indigenous community along the pipeline’s route, in order to secure approvals as quickly as possible” (para. 3). Based on the account from the

unnamed source, who has a *feeling* that Trudeau has asked Iacobucci to bribe Indigenous communities, the suggestion of wide-spread corruption becomes more encompassing.

Readers who have heard of the legitimate coverage of alleged corruption within the Federal government may be inclined to search for more information that is publicly available. As reliable public information is limited on this subject, they may resort to finding less reputable sources to satisfy their desire for further information. The *Buffalo Chronicle* appears to fill the gap of wanting more information about a sensationalized topic where reliable reporting is limited; however, the additional information used to provide supplementary coverage is heavily speculation-based while being presented as fact. This seems to be a common pattern within the *Buffalo Chronicle* articles. Within the articles explored, there are real and verifiable facts, typically involving a story that is highly sensationalized. These facts are then embellished with speculation in a way which appears to present the information as factually legitimate. It is of further interest to note that no authors of *The Buffalo Chronicle* articles are directly named. Instead, the writer remains anonymous. The coverage appears to highly target the Liberal government and are posted and re-posted during the time leading up to the election. Each article commonly links to one overarching message which is delivered through various tactics: The Liberal government is corrupt/ill-suited to be re-elected as Federal government.

4.2.2. Canada Proud Findings

Canada Proud, has previously been criticized over their controversial tactics of message delivery during the election. During the 2019 Canadian Federal Election, Elections Canada received reports of robocalls which directed the call recipient to vote on October 22, 2019. The date provided by the robocall is one day after the election ended and the calls were later linked to the Canada Proud group (Bellemare & Rogers, 2019, Oct 21). Ontario Proud, which is a localized affiliation of the Canada Strong and Proud group, reportedly received nearly \$460,000 in corporate donations to fund their campaign to vote the Liberals out of office in the 2019 election. Common tactics used by this group involves sharing viral memes and social media content to attract a large audience and generate support for their campaign (Rogers, 2019, Aug 6). Due to their history of questionable information relaying tactics and the considerable funding they have received to create a campaign to remove the Liberals from office, it becomes

worthwhile to examine their social media posts during the 6-month period leading up to the election.

576 posts from the Canada Proud Facebook group were qualitatively explored through content analysis. Overall, there are very few fictitious facts included. Interestingly, there are also very few true facts included within the dataset. The majority of posts are opinion-based without the inclusion of any fact. 90.7% of all posts captured are centred on opinion and do not include any false nor confirmed facts. The main themes which emerge from this analysis include the inclusion of trigger topics, the inclusion of language to stimulate negative emotions from the audience, and the use of hashtags. Appendix B includes screenshots of all posts used in this analysis.

Finding 1: Trigger Topics

Similar to the themes which emerged through analysis of the article from *The Buffalo Chronicle*, a considerable theme found throughout all Canada Proud posts are that they are based on a trigger topic. The topics are largely controversial in nature and are divisive in that people tend to have vastly different opinions on where they stand when confronted with the topic. The primary topics covered within the Canada Proud group fall within the realm of corruption, global affairs, veteran affairs.

Corruption

Corruption appears to be a strong theme within the posts analyzed. Many posts directly state that corruption exists within the Federal government, while other posts allude to its existence. Within the 596 Canada Proud posts examined, posts which identified corruption occurred 93 times. The following examples provided are posts where the primary topic of issue is government corruption:

Corruption Post 1: Next week, expect Justin Trudeau to sink to new lows and sleazy backroom deals in a desperate attempt to cling on as prime minister in a minority government. But Canadians shouldn't forget Justin Trudeau's double speak on who has the right to form government.

Corruption Post 2: Good. Canadians deserve answers about Justin Trudeau's rampant corruption.

Corruption Post 3: Get ready for backroom deals to keep Trudeau and his corruption in power.

Corruption Post 4: Elections are tough, but they're tougher when you're a corrupt moron like Justin Trudeau.

As illustrated through the corruption examples above, the target of all corruption posts is either Justin Trudeau directly, or the Liberal government in general. Each post includes a strongly negative stance on current political affairs. Terms such as 'sleazy' and 'moron' are used as descriptive terms to further insight and encourage a negative opinion of the Prime Minister among each of the post's audiences. Corruption posts 1, 2, and 3 depict Justin Trudeau corruption through the citing a lack of rules and accountability mechanisms in place to uphold the legitimacy of democratic decisions.

Corruption post 1 states that Trudeau engages in corruption through participating in backroom deals without accountability mechanisms in place. As seen in the post (Appendix B), the user is directed to a video link. When clicking the link, a video is presented where the Prime Minister is being interviewed by a CBC reporter where they are discussing the electoral system. The caption of this video reads, "JUSTIN TRUDEAU IS TOO STUPID TO UNDERSTAND HOW PARLIAMENT WORKS". Within the video, it appears that Trudeau is originally speaking for simplicity's sake, but the reporter is trying to engage in a more ideal discussion on how the electoral system ought to function. The interview is then cut short in this clip and the audience does not see the remainder of the interview. The video clip embedded within the post invites users to question Trudeau's intellect. Interestingly, the original claim made by this post relates to government corruption; however, the external resources provided do not substantiate or relate to the original post claim. Instead the inclusion of the video distracts the reader from exploring the corruption claim further and encourages readers to follow a secondary narrative. This diverts their attention away from collecting further information and instead they assess where they personally stand on the claim based on the narratives provided.

Corruption post 2 discusses corruption further; specifically, in relation to the SNC Lavalin scandal. Within the post, a link can be seen (Appendix B) which directs the reader to an article titled, "Andrew Scheer promises Conservative government would launch inquiry into SNC-Lavalin" (Canadian Press, 2019, Sep 26). The article primarily discusses the Conservative Party of Canada's leader, Andrew Scheer, and his election promises and platform. He discusses his concerns of corruption within the Liberal government and announces his promise, if voted as Prime Minister, to further investigate corruption related to the SNC Lavalin scandal. It becomes clear through this post that

Canada Proud serves to generate support for the Conservative Party of Canada. Canada Proud was registered as an official third party during the 2019 Canadian Federal election (Paas-Lang, 2019, July 25) and have been known to use common tactics which involve sharing viral memes and social media content to attract a large audience and generate support for their campaign (Rogers, 2019, Aug 6). Due to their support for the Conservative party, it is likely that through delegitimizing Trudeau as a political candidate for re-election, the group is actively working to encourage more votes to be earned for the Conservatives. Many posts are primarily focused on denouncing Trudeau's behaviours without suggesting a chosen alternative. Following the creation of a narrative which portrays Trudeau as largely corrupt and dishonest, the linked article provided in this post is very straight-forward in suggesting to their audience who they should vote for

Corruption post 3, similar to corruption post 1, discusses the idea of Liberal corruption as taking place behind closed-door, backroom deals. The post can be seen (Appendix B) to provide a link to a Globe and Mail article titled, "Andrew Scheer calls for majority to head off an anti-Conservative coalition" which discusses Scheer's dissatisfaction with possible talks of the Liberals forming a coalition government with the New Democratic Party (NDP) if the Liberals were to win a minority government. (Walsh, Carbet, Dickson & Kirkup, 2019, Oct 14). Scheer noted that only a Conservative majority government could prevent a Liberal-NDP coalition. In relation to the original post's message, this implies to readers that corruption can only be stopped if a Conservative majority is formed as corruption will ensue if the Liberals and NDP form a coalition. This sends the signal to the reader that in order to prevent government corruption, they must vote Conservative.

Corruption post 4 uses the term 'corrupt moron' to describe Trudeau. The post then shows a link to a video (Appendix B). In following the provided link, users are brought to a video of Trudeau during a press conference. The clip is twenty-three seconds long and provides little context regarding the nature of the press conference. A reporter then asks Trudeau an accusatory question and Trudeau blinks while leaving the question unanswered and someone else cuts in. Much like the example provided in corruption post 1, the video has little to do with the claim of corruption and instead distracts attention away from the claim towards a video intended to decrease the public's confidence in Trudeau's intelligence.

Global Affairs

Global affairs shows to be another significant topic of concern within the Canada Proud posts collected during the time of the election. Overall, the social media posts generally depict Justin Trudeau as being an embarrassment to Canada on the global stage. Of the 596 Canada Proud posts analyzed, 37 posts included the trigger topic of global affairs. Below are examples which illustrate the nature of the global affairs related posts.

Global Affairs Post 1: How desperate is Trudeau? It seems he's calling in international favours.

Global Affairs Post 2: FACT: If Justin Trudeau is somehow re-elected, his meetings with international leaders aren't going to make Canada look good.

Global Affairs Post 3: Stop the international embarrassment

Global Affairs Post 4: Yep, Justin Trudeau admitted he's the leader of a country actively committing genocide. This isn't going to end well.

Global affairs post 1, suggests that Trudeau is desperate for support during his campaign for re-election and that he needs to garner support from international figures in order to win a spot in parliament. The post advertises a link (Appendix B) which directs users to an article published by *The Post Millennial*²⁹ (Johnson, 2019, Oct 16). In following the link, readers are directed to an opinion piece which holds the position that it is not morally acceptable for Barack Obama to endorse Trudeau for re-election as it constitutes foreign interference. A tweet is captured within the article (Appendix C) which shows Obama's political endorsement. The remainder of the opinion article goes on to make allegations of attempting to secure money from elite entities such as Obama to further his campaign interests through holding a fundraiser in New York city among elite American-Canadians while pleading for donations. In verifying whether a campaign fundraiser held in another country asking for donations from elite foreign entities occurred, no information could be uncovered verifying this allegation³⁰; however, Trudeau was a guest-speaker at a political fundraiser hosted by president of the Chinese Business Chamber of Commerce in Toronto (Austen, 2016, Nov 24). Shortly after this

²⁹ According to mediabiasfactcheck.com, *The Post Millennial* is mostly factual and right-wing biased.

³⁰ In attempt to verify this claim, key words "New York Fundraiser Trudeau", "Trudeau Fundraiser", "Trudeau New York" were entered as search terms in duckduckgo.com

fundraiser, a guest of the fundraiser donated \$1 million to Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation which funds academic research within the disciplines of social sciences and humanities. Trudeau removed all connections he had to the foundation when he entered his political career. Following the fundraiser becoming public knowledge, the independent conflict of interest and ethics commissioner reviewed the matter and determined that no laws nor regulations were broken in this instance (Austen, 2016, Nov 24).

The original post discusses Trudeau's implied desperation for re-election through providing a link to an opinion article that makes substantial claims without evidence to support the claims being made in the article. The reader is taken away from the claim and their attention is directed into reading an article that supports the narrative constructed by Canada Proud. This can lead readers to develop a lack of confidence in the Liberal government. The picture of a desperate Trudeau who is corruptly accepting foreign funding and asking for favours from foreign influences with elite power in a scramble to maintain power is painted. This article further highlights an issue that is highly relevant to the overall research. Does Obama's tweet advertising his personal endorsement for Trudeau constitute as foreign interference? This will be discussed and explored in depth within the discussion section of this research.

Global affairs post 2 begins immediately by capturing the attention of readers through stating, 'FACT'. The claim then follows that if Trudeau is re-elected, global leaders will not think well of Canada. The post can be seen to provide a link to a related video (Appendix B). In watching the video, users are prompted to watch Trudeau speaking in a public forum and taking questions from the public. An audience member asks whether Trudeau has reached out to leaders from African or Middle Eastern countries to apologize for his costume where he wore blackface and was dressed in Aladdin-style attire while wearing a turban. In Trudeau's response, a direct answer to the question is avoided and Trudeau relays his commitment to engaging with world leaders and by standing up for human rights. The audience member then re-prompts Trudeau to the question asked, and again, no direct answer is provided, and the topic is changed to another question from the audience. This video is used to bring into question the Prime Minister's ability to connect with world leaders and maintain a positive image on behalf of Canada. As the blackface scandal was a significant event during the time of the election, it is clear that this issue would be used to bring into question the Prime Minister's ability

to engage in diplomacy among African and Middle Eastern countries. However, the original claim made by the post which states that global leaders will not think well of Canada is not a 'FACT' but rather a prediction or speculation based on previous events.

Global affairs post 3 further exemplifies the issue of how Trudeau is perceived on an international level. The post contains a link to a meme³¹ which includes a picture of Justin Trudeau who appears to be dancing in traditional south Asian attire. The caption reads, "VOTE OUT TRUDEAU. BECAUSE DIPLOMACY DOESN'T RUN ON THE POWER OF DANCE". The post captures Trudeau in way that suggests his cultural connections with other country's leaders is subject to mockery and he does not understand the seriousness of engaging in another culture's traditions respectfully. The post infers that, Trudeau will embarrass Canada during quests for diplomacy, thus he should not be voted into a second term of power. The message delivery system utilizes easily consumable and concisely written texts accompanied by a humorous picture to send the intended signal to media consumers.

Global affairs post 4 begins with a very attention-grabbing headline as it notes that Trudeau, the leader of Canada, admits that Canada is currently engaging in genocide. The connotation associated with this headline depicts a very nonchalant way to discuss the rather serious topic of genocide. The post then shows to provide a link (Appendix B) to an article in *The Post Millennial*. The article is titled, "Trudeau government supports international probe into allegations that Canada is committing genocide" (Taghva, 2019, June 9). The focus of this article is to add to the discussion about an international probe by the Organization of American States into an allegation of genocide cited by Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls inquiry (MMIWG)³². The conclusion of findings highlighted by the MMIWG inquiry determined that Canada is and has actively engaged in genocide of Indigenous peoples due to the historical mistreatment of Indigenous peoples and the ongoing inaction to protect the well-being of Indigenous peoples. Further, the inquiry notes that the, "Canadian state deliberately and systematically violated racial, gender, human and Indigenous rights, with its actions amounting to genocide", (Stueck & Woo, 2019, June 5, para. 7). Canada

³¹ A meme is: an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020a).

³² This fact has been cross-checked with a variety of other legitimate sources and is true.

Proud seems appears to not support Trudeau's acceptance of responsibility on behalf of Canada's role in the mistreatment of Indigenous which has contributed to the deaths of many Indigenous people. The impression delivered by this post suggests that Trudeau's admission of genocide to an international organization will negatively impact the country's image. *The Post Millennial* article linked to in this post provides very little context in relation to the overall issue of what was uncovered in the MMIWG inquiry. Readers who come across the post and read the article provided are likely to come to the conclusion that admitting to genocide is unwarranted. With more inclusive information encompassing the whole issue, readers would be able to make their personal position assessments with greater conclusive confidence.

Veteran Affairs

Veteran affairs appeared to be a common trigger topic within the Canada Proud posts collected within the period of the 2019 Canadian Federal election. As veterans are a symbol of respect and admiration for many Canadians, this is considered to be a significant topic of concern. Within the 596 Canada Proud posts analyzed, 54 posts included veteran affairs as a trigger topic. The posts below include information about the nature of the posts where veteran affairs was the primary topic of concern.

Veteran Post 1: NEW SURVEY: Justin Trudeau claims wounded veterans are asking for more than we can give. Do you agree?

Veteran Post 2: The Liberals don't care about our armed force and sure don't care about our armed veterans.

Veteran Post 3: ...and done. Exhibit #1: Trudeau telling veterans they're asking for more than we can give while giving free hotel rooms to illegal border crossers.

Veteran Post 4: Remember when Trudeau said wounded veterans were asking for more than we could afford?

The primary message being delivered amongst all veteran-related posts is that the government is mistreating veterans through not providing the resources needed or respect warranted. Veteran post 1 includes a link to a survey which appears to ask audience members about their opinion on veteran funding³³ (Appendix B). The question posed by the survey appears to be very leading. It states a claim which has a negative

³³ In following the provided link, the page cannot be found at this time (error code 404).

connotation and then asks survey respondents to participate in the survey by stating their stance on the issue. As a perspective is already suggested, the survey is likely to further capture people who also experience a negative perception on this issue and those who may have an alternative view may be less inclined to participate.

Veteran post 2 makes a very strong statement. The post implies that the government has zero care about veteran affairs. In using terms such as ‘our’ this seems to divide the general Canadian public from the Liberal government. Further, the post uses ‘wounded’ as a descriptive statement to encourage a stronger emotional response in the discussion of veteran treatment in Canada. The post (Appendix B) then provides a link to a news article by a Canadian newspaper called *The Hill*. The article is titled, “‘Veterans probably won’t vote Liberal for a very long time’: Norman case reflects Grits’ failed promises to vets, say advocates” (Moss, 2019, May 15) and is suggested to provide a factual basis to support the post’s statement³⁴. Interestingly, in following the link to the article, the audience member cannot have free access to read the article as this article is an “exclusive subscriber-only story”. While the post, which links users to what appears to be a source that provides substantiation to the claims being made by Canada Proud, the actual article cannot be read without a paid subscription which is likely to deter readers from exploring this issue any further decreasing their opportunity to engage with further information to develop their conclusion.

Veteran post 3 constructs a divisive issue. Unlike the previous posts where veteran funding was the primary concern, this social media post suggests the lack of funding available for veterans is a direct byproduct of the Liberal government’s immigration spending. This post is likely to be referring to the Canadian government’s assistance for incoming refugees who are seeking asylum in Canada due to violent conflict in their home countries. Considerable funding was allocated to assist refugees during Trudeau’s time as Prime Minister (Forrest, 2018, Nov 22). The post refers to those who are entering Canada as ‘illegal border crossers’ rather than the more empathetic and humane term of ‘refugee’. This further creates a negative stigma regarding people who are entering Canada fleeing violent conflict. This promotes the reader of the post to develop a negative association with asylum seekers and associate their presence in Canada as a liability to the well-being of home-grown Canadian

³⁴ According to mediabiasfactcheck.com, *The Hill* is mostly factual and least biased.

veterans. This post can be seen (Appendix B) to not contain a link to any external sources to verify the claims made. Rather, a picture was created by the group with a picture of Trudeau and their claim in large, uppercase font.

Veteran Post 4 includes a link to an article by *The Post Millennial*. In clicking the link, the reader is prompted to an article titled, “NATIONAL EMBARRASSMENT: Thousands of Canadian veterans are homeless” (Wakerell-Cruz, 2019, June 6). The majority of the article consists of a human-interest piece interviewing a homeless veteran named Diane Claveau and explores her experiences living in poverty following her military career which has contributed to her having a permanent disability. Claveau notes in the article that she does receive funding and assistance from Veterans Affairs Canada and Ontario Works. However, the funding assistance received is not substantial enough to allow her the opportunity to afford housing. The inclusion of this external source to the claim made by Canada Proud provides substantiation to the post’s message. The headline of the article encourages a strongly negative emotional reaction through labelling Canada’s response to the well-being of veterans as a ‘NATIONAL EMBARRASSMENT’. As this issue is sensitive within the hearts of many Canadians, the incitement of increased negative response to this trigger topic is likely to amplify this specific issue which may overpower other election-related information.

Finding 2: The Inclusion of Language to Stimulate Negative Emotions

A common theme that was uncovered throughout the data was the propensity for the authors of the Canada Proud posts to include specific words that encourage a negative emotional response in the reader. The carefully chosen choice of words used in each post deliver the intended message and promote negative feelings about the subject(s) of the conveyed message. Within the 596 Canada Proud posts examined, 227 of these posts include negative affective language. Below are examples of posts which include affective language. While the words used in each post vary, the underlying common theme appears to relate to the desire to stimulate negative emotions within the reader.

Negative Affective Post 1: ISIS terrorists supported genocide and the mass rape of women and little girls. These monsters don't belong on Canadian streets, no matter what Justin Trudeau says.

Negative Affective Post 2: Spoiled brats like Justin Trudeau will never understand what it's like growing up in the middle class. Trudeau inherited his wealth and never had to work for anything. Scheer's humble upbringing is nothing to be ashamed of – he should be proud of his roots.

Negative Affective Post 3: Trudeau says he's a Feminist, but he throws women who disagree with him under the bus.

Negative Affective Post 4: The fall campaign is almost upon us. Get ready for Trudeau to start calling everyone who disagrees with him a racist and a bigot. This is what Liberals do when they can't win an argument

Rape, Terrorism, and Young Girls

Negative affective post 1 includes a variety of words that instill adverse emotions related to the message. Such words in this example include, 'terrorists', 'genocide', 'mass rape of women', and 'mass rape of little girls'. In describing the horrific nature of ISIS terrorists, Justin Trudeau is then injected into the same sentence. After encouraging people to feel pain and disgust through affective language, they then read about Justin Trudeau while still experiencing the manipulated negative emotion. The post shows to include a link to an article published by the CBC (Appendix B). The linked article discusses Canada's strategy in handling ISIS members who are Canadian citizens and request to return home (Baksh & Draghici, 2019, Sept 30). The article makes no mention of Justin Trudeau or the Liberal government in any fashion. Following the use of a strongly horrifying description of the acts ISIS engages in, the message in negative affective post 1 implies that Justin Trudeau supports Canadian ISIS fighters returning to Canada. Yet, the linked article has zero connection to any actions of the Prime Minister. It is plausible to conclude that by using forceful words which create a strong emotional response in the reader, by then associating these emotions with a specific individual, the reader may be inclined to experience negative feelings about the individual.

Spoiled Brat

Negative affective post 2 promotes negative emotions through creating a sense of marginalization among the middle class and by demarcating the boundaries of privilege between the middle-class and the upper-class elites. The post suggests that due to Trudeau's upbringing, he is a 'spoiled brat' who does not care about middle-class Canadians. Instead, Scheer will care about middle-class Canadians as he has been raised more 'humbly' and has publicly discussed his poverty-stricken childhood. The essence of the post becomes negatively divisive and creates a narrative which divides

the middle-class 'us' from the upper-class 'them'. This may negatively impact one's feeling of financial security and perceived level access to opportunities which could influence their personal assessments of their political standing.

The Facebook post is linked to a meme (Appendix B) where it is suggested that Liberal MPs have been openly bullying Scheer about his 'humble' upbringing. According to an article in *The Post Millennial* (Wakerell-Cruz, 2019, Sept 9), a hashtag on Twitter began to rise in popularity prompting the Twittersverse to mock Scheer's upbringing. The hashtag, #ScheerWasSoPoorThat, is noted to have been a large contributor to online trolling. Many people took to participation and engagement with this hashtag as it was determined that Scheer had greatly exaggerated his experience growing up in poverty. In an article published by Maclean's (Geddes, 2019 Feb 8), it becomes evident that Scheer's account of his childhood was a carefully fabricated narrative which idealizes Scheer's attractiveness as a Prime Minister. Scheer's childhood is evidenced to be solidly middle-class.

The context of the #ScheerWasSoPoorThat hashtag was less about bullying on the basis of being poor, and more about trolling the embellished narrative. However, it is accurate that one Liberal MP did engage with the hashtag over Twitter. Liberal MP, Gagan Sikand, tweeted, "#ScheerWasSoPoorThat he had to buy his Conservative values second-hand from Stephen Harper" (Wakerell-Cruz, 2019, Sept 9). The Wakerell-Cruz (2019, Sept 9) article provides other screenshots of tweets by public figures; however, these figures have no current or direct tie to actively serving as an MP for the Liberal government. The claim made that Liberal MPs (*pluralized*) are mocking Scheer for growing up poor is accurate but an exaggeration as only one Liberal MP (*singular*) did engage. Further, the context was not provided to the reader that Scheer's embellished poverty claim was the basis for the online 'mockery'.

Throws Women Under the Bus

Negative affective post 3 describes Trudeau in a manner which inflicts negative emotions in readers due to the implication that Trudeau mistreats women. The post states that Trudeau "throws women who disagree with him under the bus". The term, to throw someone under the bus, is a metaphorical figure of speech which alludes to the notion of causing someone else to suffer by betraying them for the sake of one's own personal benefit (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020b). While the phrase is metaphorical,

the essence of the statement holds a perception of violence. Readers of this post may begin to feel that Trudeau mistreats women while experiencing the feeling of violence emanated by the term. This term is not directly implying that Trudeau engages in violence against women; however, the sentence structure of this may influence that idea in the audience's mind. The post shows a link to an article by *The Post Millennial*. The article states that the Liberal government allegedly forced a female Liberal MP to resign as she would not publicly support Trudeau as a feminist (Taghva, 2019, Sept 25). In responding to this allegation, "Trudeau says Vimy MP Eva Nassif wasn't "red lit" to run again because of her failure to laud his feminism. Says there was a different reason but won't say what that was" (The Canadian Press, 2019, Sept 25, para.10). The truth behind the allegation is difficult to determine, but the message of the article is intended to support the original claim made by Canada Proud. The message being conveyed here is that Trudeau does not value the women on his team and will "throw them under the bus" if they fail to support him. This appears to invalidate Trudeau's claim that he supports feminism and suggest a more misogynistic approach to political power. The tactic seen in this post seems to take an unverified claim and present it as truth without caveats and then use that claim as evidence for a larger unsubstantiated claim.

Racists and Bigots

Negative affective post 4 promotes anger in the readers by suggesting that Trudeau thinks that if people do not support him, they are 'racists' and 'bigots'. In reading this claim, the audience member is likely to feel angry and attacked which further promotes an overall negative feeling towards Trudeau. The post includes a clickable icon which takes the user to a meme (Appendix B). The meme illustrates Trudeau holding a Liberal-red card with his name on it titled, "THE RACIST CARD". The description located on the card reads, "TO BE USED WHEN BADLY LOSING A DEBATE WTH INTELLIGENT CANADIANS". No further information is attached to this post which would substantiate their allegation that Trudeau thinks all non-Liberal supporters are racist bigots. The method of encouraging a strongly negative emotional response where the reader feels personally attacked in combination with a meme which conveys a very strong message is likely to encourage increased anger. When combined with other posts which do include evidence for claims being made, the level of negative emotion is likely to be amplified.

Finding 3: The Inclusion of Hashtags

Hashtags are a label that are used to categorize information. Once a hashtag is created and used, this enables social media users to have more simplified access to information related to the hashtag's overall theme (Taylor, 2015). Generally, hashtags present a topic or issue, and allow users to engage with the topic through social media posts or to access this information in a more accessible fashion. Hashtags are most used on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Of the 596 Canada Proud posts analyzed, 31 posts included a hashtag. There were a variety of hashtags found within this data set. The following is a list of the most commonly used hashtags found within Canada Proud posts during the pre-election period.

- #TrudeausBananas
- #TrudeauMustGo
- #SpreadTheWord
- #SaveCanada
- #BREAKING
- #FACT
- #EXPOSED

A similarity across all posts which included hashtags was the connection of further claims and visual aids to support an anti-Liberal standpoint. Additionally, unlike in the posts analyzed in previous findings, the posts which include hashtags tend to not link to further materials or external sources. For the most part, they are posts which encourage active audience participation and include easily consumable imagery to compliment the post text.

#TrudeauMustGo and #TrudeausBananas

Figure 4.1 illustrates an example of the context where hashtags, #TrudeauMustGo and #TrudeausBananas, are used (Canada Proud, 2019a, Aug 26). This post encourages a very participatory and engaged audience. Audience members are requested to complete given social media actions as a demonstration of support. The meme within the post instructs users to like the post if they never voted for Justin Trudeau in the previous election and to share the post on their personal Facebook page

if they never will vote for Trudeau. The highlighted example in Figure 4.1 demonstrates the encouragement for the participation among social media audiences. In sharing the posts authored through Canada Proud to their own account, they are increasing the broadcast level of the post and increasing the number of Facebook users who will be exposed to the group's messages and content.

The hashtag, #TrudeauMustGo, became extremely popular on Twitter; however, a significant percentage of the tweeted hashtags were not posted by humans. In an investigation conducted by the National Observer, numerous Twitter bots were discovered to be commanding automated Twitter accounts to share the hashtag 31,600 times within a two-day period; many accounts tweeted the hashtag more than 100 times per day (CTV News, 2019, July 18). The article notes that the user responsible for most of the automated #TrudeauMustGo tweets was @CanadaProud10. This account tweeted the hashtag a total of 119 times and was later suspended by Twitter. While it may be complete coincidence that the automated account contains 'Canada Proud' in its name; in the amplification of this hashtag, a link between the Canada Proud Facebook posts and the pervasive automated Twitter account posts can be deduced.



Figure 4.1 The Inclusion of Hashtags – #TrudeauMustGo and #TrudeaulsBananas

#SpreadTheWord

Figure 4.2 provides an example of a post where the hashtag, #SpreadTheWord, was used (Canada Proud, 2019, July 5). The Facebook user is provided with a meme which is used to add weight to the claim through imagery. The meme provides information about the rate of job loss in Canada during June 2019 and provides a reference for readers to show where the information was retrieved from. In reading the cited article, the post fails to mention that, “despite the weak showing last month, over the past 12 months, Canada's economy has cranked out 421,000 new jobs” (Evans, 2019, July 5). Further, there is no comparison information within the article which provides insight on how many jobs were created in the United States during June 2019. However, this number can be confirmed through an additional source which notes that the United States has added 224,000 jobs to the economy in June 2019 (Cox, 2019, July 5). An important thing to consider that would lend further context within the comparison of these numbers would be to consider the extraordinary difference between

the population sizes of both countries. Similar to previous findings, the post provides accurate information to verify the original claim but selects specific pieces of information, while ignoring other information which would provide a more comprehensive understanding about the topic of concern.



Figure 4.2 The Inclusion of Hashtags – #SpreadTheWord

#SaveCanada

Figure 4.3 provides an example of where the hashtag, #SaveCanada, is used (Canada Proud, 2019, Sept 19). The post uses humour as a mechanism to grab user's attention and to deliver the intended message. The meme uses emojis where the option is presented on the interface to select various Trudeau emojis which occupy a spectrum of lighter to darker skin options. This meme is in reference to the blackface scandal. The hashtag, #SaveCanada, is used to imply that Canada is in danger if Trudeau is re-elected. Through using a humorous meme, a message can be delivered in a way which provides the reader a more positive platform to interpret the intended message.



Figure 4.3 The Inclusion of Hashtags – #SaveCanada

#BREAKING, #FACT, and #EXPOSED

Figure 4.4 shows an instance where the hashtag, #EXPOSED, was used. Each hashtag which used uppercase letters (#BREAKING, #FACT, and #EXPOSED) appear to utilize the hashtags in a similar fashion (Canada Proud, 2019b, Aug 26). The hashtag is included prior to a fact or event is disclosed. The example below shows the hashtag being used to capture the attention of readers which follows with a brief claim. The meme then provides further information about the claim. In exploring this ‘fact’ regarding the carbon tax further, the claims included in the image can be found in a statement made by Andrew Scheer. In a fact check by the CBC about Scheer’s carbon tax claim, they note that there are significant fallacies within the logic used to reach the 30 cents per litre increase conclusion. Realistically, the Liberal tax increase would, “cost the average Canadian household about \$5 per month in 2030” (Powers, 2019, Sept 27). This post relies on a claim made by Scheer which is contingent on inflated numbers to further increase outrage among audience member about the unaffordability of another Liberal government. In using the hashtags, #EXPOSED, #BREAKING, and #FACT, the reader infers a sense of urgency in relation to the content of the post. Further, as these hashtags are not exclusive to Canadian political issues, those who follow these hashtags

are also likely to become an audience member of these posts regardless of whether they follow the Canada Proud page or not.



Figure 4.4 The Inclusion of Hashtags – #EXPOSED

Chapter 5.

Study 3 – Qualitative Analysis of Election Related Robocalls

5.1. Content Analysis of Robocall Survey Responses

To explore the role of robocalls during the 2019 Canadian Federal election, the survey outlined in Chapter 3 included a section which asked respondents to share their experiences with election-related robocalls (ERRCs). For information on the sampling procedure and data collection process of this survey, please refer to Chapter 3.

The survey (Appendix A) first asked respondents whether they received a robocall during the time leading up to the 2019 Canadian Federal election. If they did, they were then asked if the robocall was in any way election related. If their robocall experience was election related, they were provided a text box to describe the nature of the call they received. 46 survey respondents shared their experiences with ERRCs through their written answers in the text box provided. The researcher conducted a content analysis of these responses to understand the major themes which emerged from the respondent's experiences with these robocalls. The steps of this analysis follow the same qualitative process as outlined in the analytic strategy located in Chapter 4.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Finding 1: Robocall Sender Information

Table 5.1 reveals descriptive information about the nature of the robocalls received by survey participants. Of the 190 survey responses, 28.9% of participants report having received an election-related robocall ($n = 55$). More than half (52.8%) of ERRCs were affiliated with the Conservative Party of Canada ($n = 29$). Of these 29 calls, 28 participants note that they did not believe the message that was delivered by the robocall sent on behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada. Calls sent from the Liberal Party of Canada comprises of 18.2% of all ERRCs with 3 respondents believing in the truth of the call's message and 7 people who did not believe in the accuracy of the call's content. 12.7% of all ERRCs were delivered on behalf of the New Democratic Party of

Canada with 4 people who believed that the message was truthful and 3 people who did not believe the truth of the content. Both of the Green Party of Canada ERRCs (n = 2) were determined by the call recipients to be truthful while both of the People's Party of Canada ERRCs (n = 2) were identified by the respondents who received the call to not be truthful.

Table 5.1 Robocall Frequencies Based on Political Party and Belief of Truth of Call Content

	Election Related Robocall Received (%)	Believed Truth of Robocall Content	
		No	Yes
Liberal Party of Canada	10 (18.2)	7	3
Conservative Party of Canada	29 (52.8)	28	1
New Democratic Party of Canada	7 (12.7)	3	4
Green Party of Canada	2 (3.6)	0	2
People's Party of Canada	2 (3.6)	2	0
Non-Identified Affiliation	4 (7.3)	3	1
Prefer Not to Say	1 (1.8)	1	0
Total	55 (100.0)	44	11

Of the 55 respondents who reported to have received an ERRC, 46 participants opted to provide further information regarding the nature of the call. Through qualitative content analysis, the messages delivered through ERRCs during the 2019 Canadian Federal election can be assessed to further provide insight into whether criminal interference was at play. From the qualitative assessment of each respondent's account of their experience in answering the ERRC, four themes can be uncovered which provide understanding regarding the common response of the call recipient and the goals of the message delivered through ERRCs.

5.2.2. Finding 2: A Common Call Recipient Response

Automated telephone calls which deliver a pre-recorded message to the call recipient are generally unsolicited. A person may include their phone number on a given phone list for a corporation or political party and consent to opt-in to future telephone marketing initiatives, or their phone number may have been selected through less consent-driven means. When a robocall is answered, there are two courses of

immediate action that the call-taker can take; they can choose to hang up or they may listen to the robocall's message. 26.1% of ERRC recipients (n = 12) in this survey chose to hang up immediately upon answering or briefly after hearing the beginning of the call. One call recipient noted that,

"We received multiple calls from multiple parties. By and large they are garbage. I usually hang up regardless of who is phoning because I find robocalls disrespectful of my time."

This participant's experience with ERRCs capture the annoyance that many people feel when they become the subject of an unsolicited robocall delivered to their home or personal cell number. Due to previous experiences, they may have already concluded that the messages delivered through the call are akin to 'garbage' and are not deserving of their time or energy. If a robocall is depicting false information, the held belief that robocalls are dishonest and are not worthy of the call recipient's time can serve as a protective factor in diminishing the effect of false information delivered through ERRCs on altering one's political opinion. Another participant mentioned that,

"I hung as soon as I realized it was a robocall, less than 30 seconds into the call."

This echoes the sentiment of the previous participant's view on automated telephone calls. Once a recipient realizes that they have become another victim of an impersonal marketing scheme, they opt to no longer participate in the call which results in the message delivery becoming unsuccessful.

5.2.3. Finding 3: Regular Support Generating Election-Related Robocalls

While 26.1% of recipients who answer an ERRC choose to end participation at the forefront, 73.9% of survey respondents continue to take part in the phone call. The most common type of ERRC delivered to call recipients were calls which were aimed to generate regular support from their audience. 50% of all ERRCs (n = 23) consisted of a message where the sole aim was to educate the potential voter about the party's platform, to generate party support, or to simply to remind them to vote on or before October 21st, 2019. In describing the nature of a support generating call a respondent noted that,

“What I remember was a brief, factual call about who was running (David Merner) and not much else. Don't remember much more because I'd long since decided to vote Green and most information failed to change that.”

This call receiver describes the nature of the call which provided accurate information about the Green Party candidate who was running in their area. The intention of the call was aimed to educate the caller and to generate voter support. In this case, the person who received the call had already made the decision to vote for the Green Party of Canada and this call further supported their voting decision. Another participant's positive experience with the robocall they were subject to is reflected here:

“They just wanted to tell me their platform, although I already knew it and was happy to vote for them.”

Within this ERRC encounter, the phone call that was received by the message target was accepted positively and reconfirmed their voting intentions. Call recipients who answer calls from political parties they favour are more likely to have a positive experience in answering the call. In contrast, when a call recipient is the subject of an ERRC from a party they are not aligned with, their experience may be less positive. This is depicted by a survey respondent who noted that,

“I just remember them spouting off the normal conservative bull. I don't think I listened to the whole thing.”

While the exact nature of the call is unknown, the participant receives the ERRC more negatively. It appears as though this call being discussed by the participant is a support generating call on behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada. The call was not received well by the participant as they do not affiliate with the party's ideals. Thus, they ended the call early and did not receive the entire message delivery. Calls which are specifically targeted towards supporters are generally received well and the call content is listened to in its entirety which allows the complete message to be sent and accepted. When ERRCs are delivered to non-supporters, it is likely that they are received with more of a negative reaction causing the recipient to end the call early and not be exposed to the complete message. Much like social media, message delivery through telecommunications may create information silos which further perpetuate specific ideals among a distinct population based on the information receiver's inclination to accept or reject message delivery.

5.2.4. Finding 4: Election-Related Robocalls as a Platform to Attack Other Parties

Attack advertisements at election time are not a new phenomenon. Based on the analysis of survey respondent's reports regarding the nature of ERRCs, telecommunication platforms are another option utilized by political parties to circulate negative information about their opponents. 17.4% of respondents (n = 8) noted that the primary purpose of the robocall they received was to attack political opponents. One participant explains that,

"It was basically a fear mongering call. Like "oh noes! The carbon tax will be the end of days!" but less dramatic. It resulted in a hang up and an eyeroll.'

This example of an ERRC, as discussed by the survey respondent, illustrates the use of fear tactics to promote an emotional response and propagate the party's message. The *Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act* (2018), colloquially referred to as the 'carbon tax', came into effect on June 21st, 2018 (Government of Canada, 2019). During this time, Canada's Federal government was elected as a majority Liberal government and the 'carbon tax' became an increasingly controversial issue. This ERRC exemplifies an attack on the Liberal Party of Canada by constructing a fear narrative that voting for the Liberals and their policies will be 'the end of days'. Another participant shares their experience with an ERRC which illustrates the use attacks on opponents to perpetuate their message. They state that,

"I've received multiple. Neither identified as the parties themselves but one was clearly from the Conservative party talking about Trudeau's spending. Another was from the PPC talking about Trudeau and the Roxham Road "illegal immigrants".³⁵

The survey respondent identifies two calls which involved an attack on an opposing party through deliberation with contentious and divisive issues. Both ERRCs were an attack on the Liberal Party of Canada delivered by the Conservative Party of Canada and the People's Party of Canada. The Conservative's attack-focused ERRC focused on denouncing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government spending. The

³⁵ Roxham Road is in Quebec and has become a common unauthorized border entry point into Canada for asylum seekers as they migrate from countries with a history of violent conflict. It became a controversial issue and the Liberal government was under scrutiny for not doing more to dissuade unauthorized immigration from this entry point (Ormiston, 2019, Sept 29)

People's Party attack focuses on the construction of a fear narrative which suggests illegal immigration as fundamental concern for Canadians. Notably, the respondent does not note that the party provided the call recipient with any information specific to their party platform that would bolster their own image, the calls appear to be contingent on assaulting the image of their opponent.

5.2.5. Finding 5: Deceitful or Unlawful Conduct

Election Day Party Advertisement

Section 323.1 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000) states that,

“No person shall transmit election advertising to the public in an electoral district on polling day before the close of all of the polling stations in the electoral district.”

This is considered the blackout period in which no political party or third party may advertise election materials on polling day before the polls close in all polling stations across Canada. The exceptions which apply to this rule include the advertisement of political information on the internet that was transmitted prior to the blackout period, as well as the already in-place messages conveyed on signs, banners, posters, and pamphlets. In following statement, a survey participant describes an ERRC that they received on election day:

“It was on the day of the election and was to inform me of my polling place, but it also went on about the evils of immigration and the PPC party platform. I reported it to Elections Canada.”

While reminders to vote and information regarding a voter's polling location are permitted on election day, advertising party platforms during the blackout period is prohibited. This reported call from the People's Party of Canada is in direct violation of section 323.1 of *Canada Elections Act* (2000). Along with propagating party platform information on the day of the election, this highlighted example illustrates the use of fear to persuade an emotional response. Within this example, the call recipient is exposed to an anti-immigration narrative which may cause the consumer to feel alarmed and uneasy and rethink their voting decision. Another participant reported a similar occurrence:

“It was on the day of the election and it was promoting PPC platform points which I thought was against the rules so I reported it to Elections Canada.”

The second report of election advertising during the blackout period follows the same pattern as described in the previous participant statement. Section 495.5 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000) notes that an offence that is in violation of section 323.1 is to be considered a summary conviction offence which is considered to require intent. To satisfy a guilty conviction section, it must be determined that the person who orchestrated advertisements on election day knowingly conducted advertisements during the blackout period and they are a member of a registered party, registered association, or are a registered 3rd party. From this finding, it can be concluded that there is evidence to support that there was unlawful interference in a democratic election as the criteria set out under section 495.5 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000) are satisfied.

Voter Suppression

Out of the 46 respondents who chose to share their experiences, one respondent identified that they received a robocall which told them to vote on the wrong date. Voter suppression is recognized under section 282.6 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000). This section states that, “no person shall prevent or attempt to prevent an elector from voting at an election”. During the 2019 Canadian Federal election, there were reports made to Elections Canada regarding voters in Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia receiving robocalls which directed the call recipient to vote on October 22, 2019 (Bellemare & Rogers, 2019, Oct 21). As election was held the day prior, if callers were to have listened to the advice of the robocall, they would have missed the opportunity to exercise their democratic right to vote. The one participant in this study who recalls receiving the voter suppression robocall states simply that,

“Told me the wrong election date.”

While no further details were provided by the participant, the message appears clear. They received a call which was made with the intention to prevent the voter from casting their ballot. In recalling previous similar incidents, the 2011 Pierre Poutine voter suppression scandal saw Michael Sona sentenced to a 9-month term of imprisonment and a 12-month period of probation for his role in orchestrating robocalls directed towards non-Conservative party voters in an attempt to suppress their votes (R. v. Sona, 2014). Within the context of the 2019 election, in an investigation by CBC News, the

reported misleading robocalls calls were traced to the Canada Strong and Proud³⁶ group (Bellemare & Rogers, 2019, Oct 21). While the group may not be responsible for all voter suppression robocalls delivered across Canada during the 2019 pre-election period, given the findings of Study 2, the motivation to prevent non-Conservative voters from casting their ballot may be present. The Facebook posts analyzed do not suggest any criminal action involved; however, if the group is responsible for the robocalls delivered to Canadian citizens providing them with false information about the election date, this action would confirm that the group engages in illegal activity threatening the integrity of the democratic process.

³⁶ 'Canada Strong and Proud' is the same group as 'Canada Proud'. If you search Canada Strong and Proud on Facebook, you are automatically connected to the Canada Proud Facebook page.

Chapter 6.

Discussion

Through examining the results of the three studies employed by this thesis, significant information has surfaced in relation to the main research questions. The first aim of this thesis is to answer whether the fake news pieces which circulated during the 2019 Canadian Federal election had any impact on the election's outcome. The second aim of this thesis is to determine whether there was any degree of criminal interference involved during the election. I contend that the narratives that were constructed and delivered through fake news media likely influenced many voter's election decision. Further, I also argue that there was criminal interference involved in Canadian democracy during the time of the election. This discussion will explore these statements in more depth through linking the theoretical perspective of social constructionism with this thesis' findings. Further, a legal analysis will be employed to determine the extent to which criminal interference was at play during the 2019 Canadian Federal election and the available means of investigation and prosecution.

6.1. Influence on Voting Outcomes

The qualitative examination of survey data provides valuable insight into whether exposure to misinformation on social media can influence how people decide to vote. As fake news becomes more widespread and available, there is significant concern about how the information presented to consumers by non-legitimized media sources, which is often heavily biased and inconsistent with fact, may influence democratic outcomes. Often, news media consumers desire more information about a specific topic or event that is of interest to them; however, legitimized news media may be unable to satiate the public's craving for further details as the information available to them may be limited and legitimate news content is bound by ethical integrity making quality material significantly more expensive to produce (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news content often fills the void that is created when reliable news media is inaccessible or unavailable. Reliance on fake news channels can be detrimental in elections. For democracy to be functional, citizens need to be well-informed about the current political landscape to enable them to make fully informed voting decisions (Bakir & McStay,

2018). As fake news content becomes more heavily relied on by consumers for election-related information, the user runs the risk of entering into a cyber ghetto (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). As their choice of fake news outlet is likely chosen based on their political affiliation, the opinions, narratives, and ideas generated by their choice of fake news facilitator are likely to reflect their current political outlook while precluding their exposure to counter-perspectives. They then become enveloped into an echo chamber where their current perspective becomes reiterated and amplified. Their information wealth is characterized as living within a cyber ghetto where they are impoverished by the absence of alternate ideology (Kumar & Krishna, 2014).

6.1.1. Influencing Voting Decisions – Misleading Information

Study 1 found a statistically significant effect between fake news headline 4 and the decision to change one's vote. This finding suggests that within this study, participants who were exposed to fake news headline 4 were more likely to change their voting decision than those who did not recall seeing the headline. Fake news headline 4 reads, "Elections Canada attempts to combat huge number of non-Canadians on voting register" (Gibbons, 2019, Oct 6). Interestingly, unlike the fake news headlines 1 to 3 which were determined to be fake based on containing facts that were both fictitious and unverifiable, fake news headline 4 was determined to be fake news as it is misleading. The article notes that,

"Elections Canada needed to eliminate an estimated 103,000 people from their voters' register because they aren't Canadian, but nonetheless were registered to vote. This number was later revised to 85,000, of which 74,000 were removed, according to Elections Canada." (para. 1).

It is factual that 74,000 people were removed from the voter registration list prior to the election, however; the people who were removed from the list were removed as they did not respond to Elections Canada's letter informing the letter recipient that they will be removed from voter registration unless they reply to confirm that they are qualified to vote (Elections Canada, 2019). To state that all 74,000 people were non-Canadians misrepresents the nature of the situation and falsely exaggerates the message conveyed by the headline. Exposure to this headline appeared to have a significant effect on changing one's voting outcome. The other headlines did not observe any significant

effect. This may suggest that a misleading headline can be far more effective in influencing readers than a headline which conveys a completely false story.

In considering the parallels between the information media system and the computer system, data flow within both systems are essential for the system to make an appropriate decision with consideration of all relevant factors (Libicki, 2007). Signals are sent by an information source which relay requested information to the intended destination. When the information contained in the signal is accurate and high quality, the system is able to determine an effective decision based on all available data. However, when the quality of the signal is diminished, the capacity to make an efficient decision becomes obstructed. When signals containing misleading information are sent by the information source to the destination, the decision made based on the information is likely to be misguided and deviate away from the decision that would have been made had an accurate information signal been sent. If a signal were to be sent from the source which was flagged by the system as being an untrusted source, or if the data was completely unrelated to the system's request, this information would likely be excluded from analysis. Within the context of information warfare, information delivered to intended targets containing misleading information is likely to permeate the target with more efficiency than completely inaccurate information which may be more recognizable. Fake news 4 is effective in relaying a distorted signal to the media consumer through the inclusion of misleading information.

6.1.2. Influencing Voting Decisions – False Information

It is important to note that simply because a participant is exposed to fake news, this does not mean that they believe that the news item is true. Study 1 found that there is a difference in outcomes between situations when someone is exposed to fake news and situations when someone believes in the truth of fake news. The findings suggest that those who believed that fake news 3 was true were more likely to change their vote than people who do not interpret the headline as true. There were no significant effects found within the other fake news headlines. This suggests that when a participant reads fake news, and they infer that the message is accurate, this can be an effective predictor that they may change how they decide to vote. It appears that fake news 3 may have been the most effective fake news article analyzed by this study to persuade the reader to concede the article's authenticity.

Fake news headline 3 reads, “RCMP source says ‘security risk’ against Trudeau was contrived by PMO staffers” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, Oct 15). Given the severe nature of potential threats against the life of the country’s Prime Minister, the RCMP would never divulge sensitive and classified information to an independent journal. The article suggests that the threat was manufactured by Liberal staffers to elicit sympathy for Trudeau. While this article is factually inaccurate, the message suggested by the headline infiltrated enough minds to obtain a significant finding in answering the question of whether believing in fake news may influence political decision making. As people who believed that this item was true were seen to be more likely to change their election decision, this illustrates the risk associated with the advancement of fake news avenues into the media information system.

Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand (2018) note that the problem with the public’s capacity to identify real information from fake information is much larger than simply the ability to make the distinction between the two. Instead, the problem appears to arise when headlines or statements are presented which sound true but are not. This may assist to explain why the participants who believed fake news headline 3 were more likely to change their vote than the participants who did not interpret the headline as honest. Fake news 3 illustrated the idea that the Trudeau fabricated a false security threat essentially for added attention. Given the ongoing narrative that was being developed by both *The Buffalo Chronicle* and Canada Proud which encouraged a view of the current government as being corrupted and manipulative, those who subscribed to this narrative may be more likely to find that this headline sounded true and therefore believed in the validity of the statement.

Information trolls construct fake news content and inject the manufactured narratives into public discourse. Through utilizing various techniques, the fabricated information is manufactured for the purpose of pushing a pre-determined agenda (Guo & Vargo, 2018). As was seen within the 2016 U.S Presidential election, information trolls employed by the Russian IRA carried out information warfare against American voters which likely had a significant impact on the election’s outcome (Berghel, 2017). Through first constructing information by engagement with various psychological techniques, followed by thrusting those information narratives to specific user groups, with a distinct attraction to partisan passions, the IRA’s weaponized information signals infiltrated the targeted population (Berghel, 2017). Russian IRA created social media groups and

pages were centered on deception. They appeared to the consumer to be authored by U.S citizens to advocate for their political ideologies and encourage like-minded users to connect and engage. Based on a fraudulent agreement between social media users and the façade of kindred partisan social media cliques, the IRA became an accepted social structure among the online community for political information resources.

The Buffalo Chronicle, much like the Russian IRA during the 2016 U.S Presidential election, became socially accepted by many Canadians as a resource for election information. Canadian election-related stories published by the *Buffalo Chronicle* were shared through their Facebook page and accumulated over 200,000 post shares when combined; further, their page had attracted over 4.4 million fans during the election period (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). While it is plausible that the number of shares and fans are greatly inflated due to likely activity of bot-controlled false accounts, the numbers allude to a significant level of consent by the public to grant their approval to the *Buffalo Chronicle* allowing them to dispense their constructed narratives into user's personal newsfeeds. Given the social acceptance among the public regarding to the perceived legitimacy of the website, which was gained through insincerity and through the website's ability to satisfy the public's demand for auxiliary information, the propensity for many members of the public to believe the fictitious headlines projected by the web page is comprehensible. As the findings have suggested that the belief in fake news headlines can impact the participant's political election decision, information trolls can be seen as a significant threat to the democratic process.

The findings of Study 1 suggest that fake news pieces are relevant to the information collection mechanisms practiced by consumers to gather the information needed to assess how to exercise their democratic right to vote. The findings of Studies 2 and 3 provide further insight into the nature of false information communication. Study 1 has confirmed that exposure to and the belief in misleading or falsified headlines can have an influence on how a citizen chooses to vote. Study 2 and 3 will illustrate the mechanisms, systems, tactics, and techniques utilized by information trolls in their expedition to compel their audience to accept their constructed narrative uncorrelated with the truth (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

6.2. Affective Content

Through analyzing the content created by *The Buffalo Chronicle* and the social media posts shared by the Canada Proud Facebook page, engagement with affective materials appears to be a highly useful technique to encourage a user reaction. Trigger topics between both organizations included political scandals, the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, sexual misconduct, political corruption, global affairs and veteran affairs. A common feature among information trolls is the use of noise to distract the reader or to amplify attention towards an already heavily sensationalized topic (Guo and Vargo, 2018). The SNC Lavalin scandal was a significant story throughout the election period. This topic has provided the external public a peep into the possibility of internal corruption within the Federal government. Due to the significant weight on the allegations made in relation to the scandal, a lot of questions remained unanswered. Leaving a void to be filled, information trolls were able to inoculate their supplementary materials into the media information system. In doing this, fake news communicators used the opportunity to amplify the message about to the possibility of corruption. Amplifying one issue is an effective tactic to capture the reader's concentration and block out other information signals. This can greatly reduce the ability for the democratic population to collect and assess all of the available information that is included in their personal political affiliation analysis (Carlson, 2018).

In addition to affective topics to poach audience attention, affective words are also used when crafting fake information materials. Study 2 finds that a significant number of posts contained specific words which encourage a strong negative emotional reaction in the reader. The objective of negative affective words embedded within fake news text is to perform reader manipulation by inciting anger. The primary subject of each post which contained affective words were all divisive in nature. In the examples explored, the subject matter related to refugees, middle-class vs. elitism, feminism, and racial tensions. Based on a person's ideology, their position on these issues can be at ends with people who occupy a different ideology. Through the incitement of anger, the reader is directed to feel strongly negative emotions towards those who stand on the other end of the issue. This can expand the divide between people who have different political perspectives and eliminate the common ground while pushing both parties to polarized ends of the issue. Divisive dialogue through inciting anger is effective in

manipulating voter's values and beliefs. This can be used to compel a person to stand firmly on one extreme end of the political spectrum while condemning the perspectives of those who reside on the other side (Berghel, 2017; Haataja, 2019).

6.3. Engaging the Information Consumer

6.3.1. Hashtags

Study 2 provided valuable findings related to the methods used by fake news media to encourage audience engagement. Hashtags were a common feature within the Canada Proud posts analyzed. All hashtags were associated to anti-Liberal content and encouraged users to participate through commenting, liking, and sharing the posts. An engaged audience is beneficial to encourage virality of posts. As more people like, comment, or share a post, the post becomes more popular. The primary priority in Facebook algorithms are to keep users active and engaged through providing attractive content on their newsfeed (Cooper, 2020). In determining which posts a user would most enjoy engaging with, popular and viral posts are considered by the algorithm combined with other factors such as, browsing history, purchases made, and the types of content they typically engage with (Bakir and McStay, 2018). Through encouraging social engagement with posts, Canada Proud can increase their broadcast abilities and have their messages sent to an increased number of consumers.

Hashtags are further valuable in propagating political messages. Social media platforms organize information based on the hashtag used in the respective post. In including the hashtag '#TrudeauisBananas' in a post, any person who follows that hashtag can access other posts which also utilize the same hashtag allowing them to engage with that content. By using more generic hashtags in their politically charged posts such as, #SpreadTheWord, any person who is searching for information by using this hashtag as an indicator, they are at an increased chance of becoming exposed to the constructed messages conveyed the Canada Proud posts. This enables an expanded reach to recruit audience members. While bot accounts often play a significant role in the virality of certain posts, Gabielkov, Ramachandran, Chaintreau, and Legout (2016) note that some users may re-tweet, re-post, and upvote content without giving full consideration to the content they are sharing. This is another explanation for the virality of false information content which, when considered in

combination with automated bot accounts, may provide further insight into why fictitious information available online can become so far-reaching.

Twitter observed a significant amplification of the hashtag, #TrudeauMustGo. Automated Twitter accounts were responsible for tweeting the hashtags 31,600 times within 48 hours. The account @CanadaProud10 was suspended for tweeting the hashtag over 100 times per day (CTV News, 2019, July 18). While it cannot be stated with complete certainty that this Twitter account is associated with the Canada Proud Facebook group, based on the hashtag used and the name associated with the Twitter account, it is likely that the group was broadening their message's reach across platforms to engage with an audience on a larger scale.

By sending the same signal consistently and frequently across multiple networks, information systems can experience decreased efficiency (Libicki, 2007). When the same signal is sent repeatedly to the destination, the data flow within the system decelerates as the system becomes overwhelmed with an influx of data to process. As the system collects the information required to infer an appropriate decision based on the data received, the amplification of one message may override other data received. This can cause the system to overlook other information that is relevant in processing an output. Similarly, through employing Twitter bots to command automated Twitter accounts to tweet the same signal thousands of times per day, the ability for users to collect and process election-related information via Twitter is hindered due to being inundated by one message while alternate messages become buried deep within the Twitter feed.

6.3.2. Network Reach and Echo Chambers

As the scope of communication technology and social media platforms increase, so too do the available avenues of communication to proliferate fake news content. In exploring social media, there are a variety of platforms and tools which can be used to facilitate the dissemination of false information to large audiences. As many social media communication tools are interconnected across platforms, the signals sent by the source are able to reach multiple destinations. Within Study 2, many Canada Proud posts included links to other content created on platforms external to Facebook. Hashtags used by the group on Facebook were further used on Twitter. Through expanding

network reach to connect to a multitude of agencies, the opportunity for the signal to reach an expanded audience increases.

Study 1 examined the relationships between social media usage across platforms. Significant relationships were found across nearly all platforms suggesting that a substantial number of people are active on more than one social media platform. By cross-posting messages on more than one platform, the signal not only reaches more audience members, but it can reach the same audience member multiple times. Due to newsfeed algorithms, the content on a user's newsfeed typically caters to their personal preferences. As most fake news content is premised on partisan passions (Berghel, 2017), the content is likely to be received well by the user. In seeing the same information on more than one platform, the user is likely to further internalize the perceived validity of the information being provided. Due to newsfeed algorithms and the amplification of frequent signals sent from partisan sources, the user is also at an increased risk to experience the effects of information echo chambers. As the user navigates the echo chamber, information which substantiates what they already know and believe promotes confirmation bias. The same information is being re-circulated to them and their newsfeed algorithm continues to provide content that aligns with their current beliefs ultimately limiting their exposure to counter-information (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

A significant danger associated with echo chambers is not only the lack of exposure to information that explores other perspectives, but also the danger associated with incorrect information being accepted but never corrected (Bakir & McStay, 2018). As counterevidence to a false fact cannot permeate the information silo, the ill-informed citizen remains misguided by illegitimate information as credible evidence to enlighten to individual is out of reach.

Study 1 provided interesting insight into the use of social media and its potential to create echo chambers. The finding of interest here relates to the time spent on Reddit and the likelihood that the user would change their vote. A significant effect was found among people who spend 1 to 2 hours on Reddit daily. They were less likely to change their voting decision than those who do not spend any time on Reddit and those who spend more time on the platform. While navigating the world of Reddit, users subscribe to various sub-Reddits which appeal to them. This enables users to have a significant

amount of control over the content they engage with. The structure of Reddit is significantly different than Facebook. The Reddit newsfeed consists of top stories within the sub-Reddits the user has consented to subscribe to. The Facebook newsfeeds consist of material that is filtered through an algorithm that considers a multitude of factors to predict the material the consumer wishes to view (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Often the content may be a posted from a page or group that the user is not following but is aligned with based on personal interests. While Facebook algorithms still contribute to echo chambers, they do expose the user to content created by groups that they do not currently follow. Reddit is likely to be a stronger contributor to echo chambers as newsfeeds are projected based on specific sub-Reddits of interest specified in advance by the user.

6.4. Criminal Interference in Canadian Democracy

6.4.1. Foreign Interference

When foreign entities become involved in the democratic process of a country they do not belong to, the ability for the democracy to function as it should with external influence becomes crippled. Foreign bodies may inject their influence into the political affairs of another country to encourage a result which may be beneficial to foreign interests. Section 282.4 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000) states that no person who is not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident can influence an elector to vote or not vote, or to unduly influence them to vote or not vote for a particular candidate or party. This means that parties external to Canada who are determined to be influencing a voter's election decision are in violation of this section.

Throughout the research, the findings indicated that foreign interference in the 2019 Canadian Federal election was at play during the pre-election period. Study 2 explored the fake news content delivered to Canadian media consumers containing false information about the Canadian political landscape. As 8 out of the 10 most popular stories published by *The Buffalo Chronicle* were related to Canadian politics and were all published within an 8 month window leading up to the election (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18), the non-Canadian based online independent journal fits the definition of foreign interference.

Application of Section 282.4 (Canada Elections Act)

In considering the application of section 282.4 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000), it becomes necessary to consider whether the fake news materials created by the online journal had ‘unduly’ influence on voters to vote or not vote for a particular party.

The interpretation of “unduly” is defined by an influence that, “deprives a person of freedom of choice or substitutes another's choice or desire for the person's own” (Merriam-Webster, 2020c). The influence is considered to be unduly when it is conceived in an undue manner and to an excessive degree. Within Canadian common law ‘unduly’ is a vague concept; there is no precise interpretation which can be applied to determine a purely technical meaning, instead it often denotes the seriousness of the act (*R. v. Nova Scotia Pharmaceutical Society*, 1992). There are three questions which arise in the application of this section to the content delivered by *The Buffalo Chronicle’s* coverage of Canadian politics during the pre-election period:

1. Is there any evidence to suggest that *The Buffalo Chronicle* influenced Canadian voters to vote or not vote for a particular party of candidate?
2. If such evidence exists, was the influence on Canadian voters unduly?
3. If an unduly influence is confirmed, are Canadian legal responses to the *Buffalo Chronicle’s* foreign interference actionable?

Question 1 – Evidence of Influence

The findings of Study 1 suggested that those who believed in fake news headlines were more likely to change their vote than those who did not believe the fake news headline. Of all four fake news headlines examined in this study, one headline did appear to have a significant effect on whether someone will change their vote. This headline was fake news 3 published by *The Buffalo Chronicle*. Within the sample of 190 survey respondents, 5 participants who read and believed in the truth of the headline changed their voting outcome suggesting that this article was influential on voting decisions. In considering the scope of this influence, it is worthwhile to consider the number of Facebook profiles who identified being fans of the *Buffalo Chronicle* Facebook page during the pre-election period. During the time of the election, the *Buffalo Chronicle* Facebook page had accumulated 4.4 million Facebook fans (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). While the entire following is not likely to consist

entirely of eligible Canadian voters, and there is likely to be the presence of bot controlled fake accounts, the social media page for the independent online journal had attracted a significant following during the time of election. Interestingly, when looking at the page at present day, the same Facebook page only observes 2,412 followers (*The Buffalo Chronicle* Facebook Page, 2020, Sept 21).

The findings of Study 1 supports that there is evidence to suggest that *The Buffalo Chronicle* did have an influence on at least a few Canadian voters. The significant following the page had recruited around the time of the election promotes suspicion that there were likely significantly more than a select handful of Canadian citizens who were persuaded by the false information pieces. In considering these findings, *The Buffalo Chronicle* did influence Canadian voters through spreading disinformation. However, to meet the criteria for the application of section 282.4, can this influence be considered unduly?

Question 2 – Unduly Influence

In the current age of information media, consumers are exposed to informational messages every time they open their personal electronic device to engage with their social media accounts. Given the constant stream of signals targeted at individuals, there are a few conclusions which may be drawn by the user as they sort through each information piece. The user may simply choose to scroll past the information piece, they may read and disbelieve it, or they may read and believe it. When it comes to disinformation constructed by information trolls to achieve a pre-determined result, for the people who do find honesty in a fictitious story, it does not initially appear that the definition of ‘unduly’ can be applied. The person who chose to believe the story was not deprived of their own freedom of choice. Although, due to the seriousness of an external body becoming involved in the democratic affairs of a country they do not belong to, the seriousness of the act can be inferred. This suggests that common law perspective of unduly, which denotes a level of seriousness of the act, may be applicable (*R. v. Nova Scotia Pharmaceutical Society*, 1992). In analyzing the influence of fake news creators and their influence on the sub-population of people who believe the fake news headline they were exposed to, another question surfaces. Did the person choose to believe the false information through exercising their freedom of choice, or was there willful deceit which manipulated them into believing the fake information?

Psychological Manipulation: Curated Content

When considering Facebook algorithms, many factors are considered when tasked to predict what content the user would most likely want to engage with. Collecting data about the user proves to be valuable in providing the user with social media content that will keep the user engaged for long periods of time. Information including the groups they are in, the pages they like, the content they look at for certain periods of time, the profiles of their friends and followers, their browsing history, their purchase history, and the time of day they are active on social media are all collected and entered into the algorithm to provide a personalized output onto each user's newsfeed (Bakir & McStay, 2018). As the material becomes more specifically curated to suit the unique profile of the user, the information presented to them becomes more psychologically filtered to amuse their personality. In considering the findings of Study 1 which found relationships between political affiliation, the primary source of information people depend on for election-related news, the exposure to certain fake news articles, and the belief in specific fake news articles, there is evidence to suggest that fake information is targeted among specific user types. Algorithms personalize the specific materials that a person will read, and minimize content not suited to the user's data-informed user profile; it is likely that higher proportions of the population who fit a certain user archetype are being selectively exposed to fake news articles at a higher rate than other user groups who do not match the same criteria. When a significant level of psychological control is allocated to social media consumption, how much level of personal choice can be exerted in believing fake news content that is curated to one's unique user profile?

In Study 2, many findings seemed to suggest that information trolls carefully consider how they craft their fake news media pieces to best persuade their readers to subscribe to the underlying message contained in the post. *The Buffalo Chronicle* findings appeared to suggest that a real and concrete issue was used while adding false information to cushion the delivery of their anti-Liberal messages. The findings of the Canada Proud group illustrate that it can be effective to utilize affective content to attract the reader's attention and encourage them to become emotionally invested in the problem being presented, and then pad their involvement with misleading external sources. In considering the level of psychological manipulation used in the construction of the fake news piece combined with the role of algorithms to directly target the content towards certain consumers, it can be argued that the information attacks explored in this

thesis do meet the unduly threshold. The non-legal definition of 'unduly' is met; given that the specific nature of the fake information was targeted towards a specific consumer based on their psychological profile. This removes a degree of free choice in accepting the validity of disinformation material; the content has been deliberately delivered to the person due to them fitting a profile that is likely to engage with the material and support it. The legal definition of 'unduly' is also met; weaponizing information to serve a specific purpose is seen as informational violence which is a form of non-material cyber attack that holds the potential to threaten an entire democratic system (Haataja, 2019). This suggests a significant degree of seriousness.

Question 3 – Actionable Legal Responses

As questions 1 and 2 have been explored and the criteria of each question have been satisfied, it is now important to establish whether Canadian legal responses would be actionable to the circumstances explored. Section 3.7 of the *Criminal Code of Canada* (1985), determines Canadian legal jurisdiction. This section states that any person outside of Canada who commits an act (that would constitute a criminal offence if it were to be committed within Canada) against a Canadian citizen, is deemed to have committed that act within Canada and are subject to legal punishment within the Canadian justice system. It has been established that the foreign interference which took place is in violation of section 282.4 of the *Canada Elections Act*. Section 491.2 (1)(q) of the same act notes that in order for guilt to be found guilty of collusion under 282.4, intent must be proven. The alleged man behind the website, Matthew Ricciazzi's, has a history of offering his services to publish positive or negative coverage of political candidates for a fee; further, he and *The Buffalo Chronicle* both received funding from a committee which was formed to advocate for the election of Joel Giambra as Governor of New York (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). If an investigation were to uncover evidence that a transaction was involved in the disinformation attack against the Liberal party, intent would be established, and a guilty verdict may be reached. The issue now relates to the realism of carrying out an investigation against a foreign entity.

In establishing guilt, it is important to know who was responsible for the act. Would the guilty party be the man behind the site, or the person(s) who crafted the disinformation article? To answer these questions, an investigation would be required to understand the nature of the circumstances associated with the crime. The capacity for

police to conduct complex investigations within the intricate bounds of technology may be limited by tools and technological expertise (Brown, 2015). It is currently unknown whether Ricciazzi also authored each piece of disinformation, or whether he simply approved and uploaded each article. The authors of the articles in question remain anonymous; this would necessitate considerable methods of investigation. Complex investigations into cyber crime are often not within the abilities of the police. They require a high level of sophisticated expert knowledge and significant resource allocation. For example, an investigation may yield information about an IP address of interest which may assist the identification of the suspect. However, the IP address alone is not sufficient evidence as a user with technological know-how can simply circumvent detection through manipulating their IP details. This makes identifying the suspect behind the computer increasingly more difficult without an expert understanding of cyber investigative methods (Kao & Wang, 2009).

If an investigation were to be successfully carried out and a suspect, or suspects, were identified, the next step would be extraditing the person(s) from the host country to Canada to participate in the adversarial process. This requires the cooperation of the country where the suspect is located. *The Buffalo Chronicle* is said to be located in Buffalo, New York; however, there is evidence to suggest that this simply may not be true (News Guard Tech, 2020). If the U.S location is true and the suspects responsible are also residing in the U.S, then the plausibility of extraditing the suspects to Canada for prosecution is feasible given the existence of an extradition treaty. In the circumstance where those responsible are found to not be located in the U.S and instead currently reside in another country where an extradition treaty does not exist, the likelihood for conviction of the crime significantly decreases due to a likely absence of international cooperation with a Canadian investigation. Investigations which transcend borders require the country of interest to allocate their resources to a crime which was not committed against their own citizens. Unless the crime also affects their own citizens, requesting law enforcement assistance can be a tough sell.

The criteria set forth through questions 1 and 2, which related to the legal application of the offence of foreign interference, were met. Question 3 is contingent on the ability to conduct an investigation within the scope of international jurisdiction. An investigation to be completed successfully is contingent on a variety of factors. The technological expertise of the investigators, resource allocation, the existence of an

extradition treaty, and the cooperation of international actors. While it may be legally proven that foreign interference was an issue in the 2019 Canadian Federal election, there are barriers that may prevent a successful investigation into the issue.

Obama on Twitter – Is This Foreign Interference?

In Study 2, an opinion article by *The Post Millennial* (Johnson, 2019, Oct 16) was discussed which included a tweet captured within the article (Appendix C) which shows Obama's political endorsement for Trudeau's re-election. The author of the article suggests that it is not acceptable for Obama to endorse Trudeau as this would constitute foreign interference. Given the criteria set out by section 282.4 of *Canada Elections Act* (2000), it is unlikely that this tweet would constitute an 'unduly' influence on the readers. As the tweet does not contain any further information, such as false information or affective content to psychologically manipulate the reader into engaging with the post, there are no factors present to suggest that his act of endorsement is a serious criminal act, nor does it remove the ability for a person to exercise their own freedom of choice.

6.4.2. Robocall Interference

Findings from Study 3 found evidence to support that there was an attempt to prevent voters from casting their ballot in the 2019 Canadian Federal election. While the majority of the election-related robocalls (ERRCs) received by survey respondents seemed to be regular support generating calls, there also appears to be two Canadian laws broken through the robocalls delivered to Canadian voters. Political interference was at play through violating section 323.1 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000). This section relates to the prohibition of advertising a party or candidate on polling day. Campaign advertisements on the day of election can cloud the minds of the voters through eliminating a free environment to finalize their voting decision. Additionally, as set out by section 282.6 of the same act, there is evidence to suggest that voter suppression was attempted by delivering robocalls which informed the call recipient of the wrong date to vote. Canada Proud was found to be responsible for delivering robocalls on the day of the election informing the voter to vote "tomorrow"; they have claimed it was accident as some of the calls were meant to be sent out the day prior to the election (Paas-Lang, 2019, July 25. Interestingly, some callers report that the call they received had explicitly stated that election day was to occur on October 22nd, 2019.

As the election occurred on October 21st, if call recipients were to have depended on the information contained in the robocall, they would have missed their opportunity to provide their vote. In exploring these two political infringements, the nature and scope of criminal interference can be assessed.

Section 323.1 - Canada Elections Act

In one participant's account of the People's Party of Canada robocall they received on election day, they noted that rather than simply informing the recipient about their polling location and providing their party's platform, they went further and provided an anti-immigration narrative. There is no prohibition placed on providing the voter with information about their polling place, assuming the information is correct. However, to provide the party's platform and include a politically charged anti-immigration narrative, this can considerably cloud the mind of the voter during the blackout period. Study 2 has provided information regarding the use of affective content to deliver an intended message. The nature of the robocall described by the participant illustrates the use of affective content through referencing the "evils of immigration". While this may be permissible under the freedom of speech on any other day, delivering this message to a voter's phone on the day of election can be seen as unlawful interference in a democratic election.

Section 282.6 - Canada Elections Act

Numerous accounts of robocalls informing the call recipient about the wrong election date surfaced during the 2019 Canadian Federal election. Voter suppression robocalls have occurred during Canadian elections in the past. The most prominent case in previous elections which resulted in a conviction was Michael Sona's involvement in the Pierre Poutine voter suppression scandal in 2011. Sona worked on the Conservative Party campaign throughout the pre-election period. During the Canadian Federal election in 2011, approximately 6,000 voters received a robocalls falsely informing the voter that their polling location had changed (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Aug 10). Along with the deceitful robocalls, there were 17 other ridings across Canada where robocalls were reported which were harassing or provided them false information about the upcoming election. These ERRCs appeared as an active effort to prevent Liberal supporters from voting in the election (Maher and McGregor, 2012, Feb 23a). In being able to determine which phone numbers belong to non-Conservative voters, the ability to

orchestrate a targeted disinformation attack to prevent those voters from casting their ballots would seek to decrease the number of votes received by opposing parties.

Within the context of the 2019 Federal election, a considerable number of deceitful robocalls were linked to the Canada Proud group. Earlier during the pre-election period, the group delivered a series of robocalls asking the call recipient about how they intended to vote in the upcoming election (Paas-Lang, 2019, July 25). Study 2 has illustrated that the group strongly supports the Conservative Party of Canada through the anti-Liberal content shared supplemented with pro-Conservative materials. Further, Canada Proud was officially registered as a third-party in the federal election in July 2019 (Paas-Lang, 2019, July 25). Through creating a list which provides information about non-Conservative supporters, the group would have had the information necessary to equip them to deploy a disinformation attack against voters who did not intend to vote Conservative in the election.

Canada Proud appears to employ diverse tactics which seem to all share the same goal: to remove the Liberals from office by preventing their re-election in the 2019 Canadian Federal election. Study 1 has illustrated that fake news headline 1, which is a post headline created by Canada Proud, shows to have a significant relationship with Facebook use, identified political affiliation, and all other fake news headlines. Given the relationships that exist between these variables, this finding further provides evidence for the group's prolific reach on social media which may target people with specific political affiliations and may generate support for other fake news sources that are heavily focused on anti-Liberal content. Study 2 has provided insight into specific strategies used in delivering the constructed messages. Through basing their narrative in sensationalized topics, including affective content, and encouraging user engagement which extends across social media platforms, the messages delivered by the group appear to have significant power of influence on their audience. Study 3 evidences the existence of disinformation robocalls during the time of the election. Although the case discussed by the survey participant cannot prove that Canada Proud was responsible for this specific case, the external evidence about the nature of the calls and the group responsible can be used to provide insight. While the findings of Study 1 and Study 2 did not depict any criminal activity, what is known about the deceitful election-related robocalls delivered by Canada Proud does navigate into the jurisdiction of unlawful conduct.

Ontario Proud, which is a localized affiliation of the Canada Strong and Proud group, reportedly received nearly \$460,000 in corporate donations to fund their campaign to vote the Liberals out of office in the 2019 election (Rogers, 2019, Aug 6). *The Buffalo Chronicle* too has a history of receiving payments from partisan advocate groups and the person who runs the website has a history of advertising to publish positive or negative coverage for political candidates for a fee (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). Based on the findings across studies, both groups are heavily focused on propagating anti-Liberal, pro-Conservative content. While the financial information relating to a history of receiving donations from partisan interest groups cannot directly evidence a deliberate and funded disinformation campaign, the donations received and the actions of both entities do suggest a high level of suspicion in relation to the motives of the content created and posted. The findings do support that information trolls were responsible in constructing both disinformation and misinformation attacks on Canadian democracy through the content delivered by both *The Buffalo Chronicle* and Canada Proud.

6.4.3. Social Construction Theory and Information Trolls

What we perceive as knowledge is subject to an elaborate network of social interaction which influences how we understand the social and natural world (Lindgren, 2005). It is through social interactions that reality is constructed. The ability to construct knowledge and reality relies in the legitimacy of the social structure that is being engaged with. When the structure is perceived as holding a legitimate role in the dissemination of information, the power to create knowledge is permitted. Issues arise when knowledge creation structures misrepresent their qualifications. Through deception, claims makers who engineer false information while presenting it as real knowledge have come to be socially accepted among their audience and have accumulated considerable power. Through establishing power, fake news creators are able to interject their “distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth” into social reality (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). The more the signal becomes accepted by the social body, the more power of influence it possesses.

Information trolls construct a false depiction of reality through manipulating their perceived legitimacy to produce knowledge. Authors of the content delivered by both Canada Proud and *The Buffalo Chronicle* are exemplary of the disingenuous process of

socially constructed knowledge. In encouraging user engagement, expanding operations over multiple social media platforms, and amplifying their messages, they may achieve a sense of enhanced legitimacy. In carefully crafting knowledge pieces to include affective content focused on contentious issues, they are effective in encouraging moral panics to ensue. By inducing a moral panic through a disinformation campaign, social unrest is manufactured, and a threat is assumed towards an issue that may not be relevant to the overall picture (Carlson, 2018). In establishing trust among the social body in their role to produce knowledge, information trolls can be effective in forcing social discourse to place attention to constructed threats unassociated to genuine reality.

Disinformation campaigns weaponize information and are a form of non-material cyber attack which can pose a threat to an entire democratic system (Haataja, 2019). This research has provided evidence for the existence of information warfare within the 2019 Canadian Federal election which has been characterized by foreign interference and voter suppression strategies. While this research cannot provide context into the scope of the criminal interference, it does illustrate the nature of the informational violence that transpired. This research has examined what has happened; however, it is far outside the scope of this research to examine what could have been if information trolls were not involved in democratic interference. Given the significant number of followers and supporters accumulated by the two main fake news perpetrators examined within this thesis, it may be possible that the outcome of the election could have been different without the involvement of active disinformation campaigns. It remains that weaponizing information can have catastrophic outcomes on the democratic process; information warfare was a factor in the 2019 Canadian Federal election and information trolls had successfully negotiated legitimized access into the media information system and permeated their narratives into social discourse.

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

7.1. Current Research

This exploratory research has aimed to answer two main questions. The central questions for this research were:

Research Question 1: Was fake news delivered during the election and if so, could it have had an effect the outcome of the 2019 Canadian Federal election results?

Research Question 2: Was there any criminal interference involved during the time of the 2019 Canadian Federal election in relation to delivering false information through social media, news outlets, or robocalls?

Both research question 1 and 2 were answered through the employment of three separate studies. In combining the findings of each study, each question is answered with greater detail. Study 1 was significant in providing evidence that fake news headlines can have a significant impact on how a participant decides to vote. Through using headlines which were disseminated to the public during the pre-election period, quantitative analysis of the survey results provided a model that was significant in illustrating that those who were exposed to certain fake news headlines and those who believed certain headlines were more likely to change their voting decision than those who were not exposed or those who did not believe in the headline. Study 2 and 3 also provided insight into the first question. Social media posts and news articles containing false information were published and targeted to the public audience. These posts typically included divisive materials and affective language which appeared to encourage the incitement of anger and outrage among its readers. Study 3 further provided evidence in spreading false information through the use of robocalls.

Studies 2 and 3 played a significant role in answering the second question. *The Buffalo Chronicle*, which published false stories that were heavily focused on the Canadian election, is not a Canadian publication. While the exact origin of the source is unverified, they are noted to be based in the U.S. This was proven in the examination to constitute foreign interference which is prohibited under Canadian election law. Further,

study 3 has provided evidence to illustrate that the robocalls received by survey respondents violate the rule prohibiting election advertising during the blackout period of an election. Of more serious concern, voter suppression was also evident in this research. Voter suppression was evident in one participant's robocall experience. It is unclear what group or party the call was delivered by, but the aim of the ERRC appeared to prevent the voter from casting their ballot by informing them of the wrong day to vote.

7.2. Recommendations

As social media becomes more engrained in culture, the ability for false information to use social media platforms as a method to deliver informational violence becomes more powerful threat. Information warfare can threaten the entire system of democracy through inoculating false narratives into the information news media while actively engaging in deception to encourage acceptance among their audience members (Haataja, 2019). In a world of addictive media consumption habits, the solutions to such an intricate issue are likely not simple themselves. When developing counterstrategies to prevent fake news circulation, Kumar and Krishna (2014) note that it is much more advantageous to prevent fake news circulation rather than to try and address it after it has become infectious within the public domain.

Routine activities theory (RAT) states that there are three essential elements which make it likely for a crime occur when these elements converge between time and space (Felson & Cohen, 1980). The elements are: 1) a motivated offender, 2) a suitable target, and 3) absence of a capable guardian. According to Felson and Cohen (1980), if there is a person who is motivated to commit a crime, and the opportunity to commit that crime is met by a target that is suitable to their motivation and it is unguarded by a capable person or thing, a crime is likely to occur. Typically, this theoretical framework is applied to crimes which occur in the physical domain; however, a parallel can be drawn between RAT and crimes which occur in the cyber domain.

Within the context of this research, all elements of RAT can be identified and may help explain both the occurrence of disinformation campaigns, as well as, offer insight into potential solutions to prevent them. The motivated offender can be understood as the person, group, or institution responsible for orchestrating the

information attack. The motivations may potentially be money, political power, or notoriety. The suitable target is the information consumer. The goal of the motivated offender is to infiltrate the reader's newsfeed with false information materials. In many social media platforms, there is an absence of a capable guardian. As most social media platforms are powered by user content without significant controls or filters, the content that is generated for public viewing does not involve a process of scrutiny and review, such as, publications in an academic journal or a legitimate newspaper would. To prevent disinformation from gaining public attention and affecting the reader's mind, removing one of the three elements of RAT would reduce the likelihood of information violence (Felson & Cohen, 1980).

Previous literature has made recommendations to prevent fake news from being widely circulated and accepted. Bakir and McStay (2018) suggest that there are significant changes that could be implemented by social media companies to make consumers aware that the information presented may not accurately reflect reality; these recommendations relate to creating the presence of a capable guardian. One of their recommendations include ensuring that only higher quality pieces from trusted journalistic sources appear on a user's newsfeed. When a user clicks on an item and sees articles related to the content they just expressed interest in, it is suggested that tweaks could be made to the algorithm to encourage less reputable news pieces to appear lower in the item list. The authors further recommend that third-party fact checking processes be implemented. If a news piece is found to be less than honest, it is suggested that a red flag could appear on the item notifying the consumer that the information they are about to read did not pass the fact-verifying process. However, given that false information media may be frequently created and constantly infiltrating numerous newsfeeds, the ability to keep up with fact checking each item may be limited. Finally, the authors suggest that disrupting fake news economics would provide more transparency. This includes eliminating the ability for fake news sources to 'spoof' their domain. In spoofing their domain, they appear to the reader to be representative of a legitimate news organization while in fact their domain masquerades their real identity.

There is no perfect solution to prevent the spread of information warfare. Consumers of all news media should stay vigilant and critical when reading news media pieces; however, this may be a lot to ask of consumers as the stream of information is constant. Information is administered to consumers every time they open their social

media pages, turn on the television, open up a magazine or catalogue, drive past a billboard, listen to the radio, or watch a movie. Due to the steady stream of information signal, it is unlikely that a consumer would be able to critically assess the validity of all messages. Fact checking websites and resources have become more popular and provide information about the source's background which may be helpful in determining whether the information is being delivered by a trusted source. Information trolls use strategic deception to construct and disseminate disinformation, the onus is placed on the consumer and the source host to respond to and mitigate threats of information warfare.

7.3. Implications

This research has provided evidence to support that fake news can influence democratic minds. The integrity of Canadian democracy is threatened by information warfare. While this research cannot contend how large of an impact disinformation campaigns had on the 2019 Canadian Federal election, it does contend that at least for a number of participants in this study, their votes were influenced by fake news. This research has further provided insight into the techniques and mechanisms used by information trolls in their construction and propagation of false information. Future research would do well to collect a larger survey sample to enable more insight into the scope and severity of fake news attacks during elections. This research could be used to further the discourse on preventing information warfare. Through understanding and recognizing the techniques used by information trolls, those tasked to detect deliberately created fake news pieces are better equipped to flag deceitful messages and prevent them from infecting political public discourse.

It should be noted that social media, fake news, and robocalls are only three individual nodes that can be utilized to inject disinformation to the public discourse and influence public thought. Within the social constructionist theoretical framework, what we understand as knowledge is subject to an elaborate network of social interaction (Lindgren, 2005). This research focuses on a limited number of factors which may help to explain the interaction between false information and a person's change of beliefs or values; however, there are many other factors to consider within this interaction that are well beyond the scope of this study. A person's upbringing, their family unit, the influence of friends or role models, their school or working environment, and additional

psychological factors are just a few of the many variables to consider in understanding how disinformation spreads, and why it may have an affect on the democratic voter's mind. Future research should seek to examine these variables in more depth.

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Appendix A.

Fake News Survey

The Canadian Fake News Survey

Study Number: 2020s0038

Research Purpose: This research focuses on misinformation delivered during the time leading up to the 2019 Canadian Federal election. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information, which is typically intended to deliberately deceive readers or viewers for a specific purpose. This research hopes to better understand how prolific fake news and misinformation have become within the Canadian political climate. More specifically, this research hopes to gain insight through the answers you provide to understand that extent to which misinformation may or may not have affected the results of the 2019 Canadian Federal election. Another topic of interest in this research are robocalls related to election issues. A robocall is an automated telephone call which delivers a recorded message, typically on behalf of a political party or telemarketing company. We hope to explore how prevalent robocalls related to election issues were in the time leading up to the election. You will be asked some demographic information, your opinions about certain news pieces, and your experiences with robocalls (if you had any). As this study focuses on the spread of fake news and misinformation, it is important to reach out to social media users on different platforms to gather information in this area, which is why we are reaching out to you.

***To participate in this study, participants must be 18 years or older, a Canadian citizen, and you must have voted in the 2019 Canadian Federal election.**

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether you would like to participate or not. If you decide to participate, but change your mind later, you can stop participation at any point, by closing your browser.

Type of Research Intervention: This research will involve your participation in an online survey that may take up to 15 - 20 minutes of your time. Risks: This study is

minimal risk. However, some participants may feel uncomfortable with some of the questions asked. If a question comes up that you do not feel comfortable in answering, you may skip the question by selecting the “prefer not to say” option. This option is made available for each question in this survey. Further, you can choose to withdraw from the study at any point by closing your web browser. In closing the web browser, your responses will be discarded.

Benefits: There is no direct benefit to you in this study, but having you participate through providing your valuable input will allow research to be created that will develop knowledge about the spread of fake news and misinformation in the political climate. Further, it is important to develop an understanding about the nature of any robocalls received by Canadian voters to ensure they are in-line with Canadian election laws.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Participation in the survey is anonymous and every effort will be made to keep the information you provide confidential. Your name will never be connected to the data you provide. Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to completed surveys and even then, will not have access to any information that identifies you. Further, online data collection methods will not be able to identify you (IP address and geodata collection elements are disabled). Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to this data. Please note that posting to comments sections on social media or other forums about this study may identify you as a participant, we therefore suggest that if this study was made available to you via a social media site or other online forums, you refrain from posting comments to protect your anonymity. The information collected from this study will be stored on Qualtrics servers located in North America and is subject to the U.S. CLOUD (Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data) Act that allows federal law enforcement to compel U.S.-based technology companies via subpoena to provide requested data stored on servers. However, your name will not be connected to the information you provide, so identifying you directly would be difficult. Data will also be stored indefinitely on an encrypted, password protected computer belonging to myself. This data may be used in future research projects. Results from this study will be disseminated via presentation, in

aggregate form only (grouped or summary statistics, so individual responses will never be identified), at research conferences and through publication in research journals.

Contact Information: If you have questions about this study, please contact the principal investigator, Dr. Richard Frank; [...] or co-investigator, Rachelle Loudon; [...].

Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study? If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Jeffrey Toward, Director, Office of Research Ethics [...] or [...].

Important Notice: By proceeding to the next page, you are indicating that you understand this consent form – are 18 years or older, are a Canadian Citizen, and you voted in the 2019 Canadian Federal election – and agree to participation in this study.

Q1. My gender is...

- ☐ Man (1)
- ☐ Woman (2)
- ☐ Genderqueer/Non-Binary (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q2. What is your age?

- ☐ 18 – 25 years old (1)
- ☐ 26 – 34 years old (2)
- ☐ 35 – 43 years old (3)
- ☐ 44 – 52 years old (4)
- ☐ 53 – 61 years old (5)
- ☐ 62 – 70 years old (6)
- ☐ 71+ years old (7)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (8)

Q3. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

- ☐ Some High School (1)
- ☐ High School (2)
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree (3)
- ☐ Master's Degree (4)

- ☐ Ph.D. or higher (5)
- ☐ Trade School (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (7)

Q4. What is your annual household income?

- ☐ Less than \$24,999 (1)
- ☐ \$25,000 - \$49,999 (2)
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$99,999 (3)
- ☐ \$100,000 - \$199,999 (4)
- ☐ More than \$200,000 (5)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (6)

Q5. How many languages do you speak fluently?

- ☐ 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 or more (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q6. How would you describe your political view?

- ☐ Very Liberal (1)
- ☐ Slightly Liberal (2)

- ☐ Moderate (3)
- ☐ Slightly Conservative (4)
- ☐ Very Conservative (5)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (6) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say (7)

Q7. Which of the following forms of media do you primarily depend on to keep you up to date on news, current events, and issues?

- ☐ TV (1)
- ☐ Social Media (2)
- ☐ Internet (not including social media platforms) (3)
- ☐ Radio (4)
- ☐ Newspaper (printed) (5)
- ☐ Magazine (6)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (7) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say (8)

Q8. What was your primary source of information regarding party platforms in the 2019 Canadian Federal election?

- ☐ TV (1)

- ☐ Social Media (2)
- ☐ Internet (not including social media platforms) (3)
- ☐ Radio (4)
- ☐ Newspaper (printed) (5)
- ☐ Door to door party representatives (6)
- ☐ Telephone callers (7)
- ☐ Brochures in mail (8)
- ☐ Emails sent on behalf of the political party (9)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (10) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say (11)

Q9. How many social media sites do you have accounts with?

- ☐ 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)
- ☐ 4 (4)
- ☐ 5 (5)
- ☐ 6 or more (6)
- ☐ None (7)
- ☐ Prefer to not say (8)

Q10. Which of the following social media platforms are you most active on?

- ☐ Facebook (1)
- ☐ Twitter (2)
- ☐ Reddit (3)
- ☐ Instagram (4)
- ☐ Tumblr (5)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (6) _____
- ☐ None (7)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (8)

Q11. How much time do you estimate you spend on Facebook daily?

- ☐ None (0)
- ☐ Less than one hour (1)
- ☐ 1 to 2 hours (2)
- ☐ 2 to 3 hours (3)
- ☐ 3 to 4 hours (4)
- ☐ More than 4 hours (5)

Q12. How much time do you estimate you spend on Twitter daily?

- ☐ None (0)
- ☐ Less than one hour (1)

- ☐ 1 to 2 hours (2)
- ☐ 2 to 3 hours (3)
- ☐ 3 to 4 hours (4)
- ☐ More than 4 hours (5)

Q13. How much time do you estimate you spend on Reddit daily?

- ☐ None (0)
- ☐ Less than one hour (1)
- ☐ 1 to 2 hours (2)
- ☐ 2 to 3 hours (3)
- ☐ 3 to 4 hours (4)
- ☐ More than 4 hours (5)

Q14. How much time do you estimate you spend on Instagram daily?

- ☐ None (0)
- ☐ Less than one hour (1)
- ☐ 1 to 2 hours (2)
- ☐ 2 to 3 hours (3)
- ☐ 3 to 4 hours (4)
- ☐ More than 4 hours (5)

Q15. How much time do you estimate you spend on Tumblr daily?

- ☐ None (0)
- ☐ Less than one hour (1)
- ☐ 1 to 2 hours (2)
- ☐ 2 to 3 hours (3)
- ☐ 3 to 4 hours (4)
- ☐ More than 4 hours (5)

Q16. Did you receive a **robocall** to your mobile or home phone in the 3 months leading up to the 2019 Canadian Federal election?

A **robocall** is an automated telephone call which delivers a recorded message, typically on behalf of a political party or telemarketing company.

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If Did you receive a robocall to your mobile or home phone in the 3 months leading up to the 2019 Ca... = Yes

Q17. Was the robocall related in any way to the upcoming election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If Was the robocall related in any way to the upcoming election? = Yes

Q18. Which political party did the robocall identify as being affiliated with?

- ☐ Liberal Party of Canada (1)
- ☐ Conservative Party of Canada (2)
- ☐ New Democratic Party of Canada (3)
- ☐ Green Party of Canada (4)
- ☐ Bloc Québécois (5)
- ☐ Independent Party (6)
- ☐ Not sure (7)
- ☐ They did not identify as being affiliated with any specific party (8)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (9)
- ☐ People's Party of Canada (10)

Display This Question:

If Was the robocall related in any way to the upcoming election? = Yes

Q19. Would your best guess be that the information provided by the robocall was true?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If Was the robocall related in any way to the upcoming election? = Yes

Q20. In the space below, please describe the nature of the robocall in as much detail as needed.

If you would prefer not to answer, please leave the textbox blank.

Q21. Based on what you observed in the media regarding the election, did anything presented by the media change your decision to switch from one party to another?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ I had not decided on a party beforehand (3)
- ☐ I did not observe any media related to the election (4)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (5)

Display This Question:

If Based on what you observed in the media regarding the election, did anything presented by the med... = Yes

Q22. What party did you originally intend to vote for?

- ☐ Liberal Party of Canada (1)
- ☐ Conservative Party of Canada (2)
- ☐ New Democratic Party of Canada (3)
- ☐ Green Party of Canada (4)
- ☐ Bloc Québécois (5)
- ☐ Independent Party (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (7)
- ☐ People's Party of Canada (8)

Display This Question:

If Based on what you observed in the media regarding the election, did anything presented by the med... = Yes

Q23. What party did you end up voting for?

- ☐ Liberal Party of Canada (1)
- ☐ Conservative Party of Canada (2)
- ☐ New Democratic Party of Canada (3)
- ☐ Green Party of Canada (4)
- ☐ Bloc Québécois (5)
- ☐ Independent Party (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (7)
- ☐ People's Party of Canada (8)

Q24. *"Singh says NDP would form coalition with the Liberals to stop Tories"*

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If *"Singh says NDP would form coalition with the Liberals to stop Tories"* Do you recall seeing thi... = Yes

Q25. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: *"Singh says NDP would form coalition with the Liberals to stop Tories"*

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q26. *"Justin Trudeau is trying to rig the election through controlling the Canadian news media"*

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)

- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If *"Justin Trudeau is trying to rig the election through controlling the Canadian news media"* Do y... =
Yes

Q27. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: *"Justin Trudeau is trying to rig the election through controlling the Canadian news media"*

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q28. *"RCMP plans to charge Trudeau with obstruction in SNC Lavalin affair, following federal elections"*

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If "RCMP plans to charge Trudeau with obstruction in SNC Lavalin affair, following federal elections..."
= Yes

Q29. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: "RCMP plans to charge Trudeau with obstruction in SNC Lavalin affair, following federal elections"

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q30. "RCMP source says 'security risk' against Trudeau was contrived by PMO staffers".

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If "RCMP source says 'security risk' against Trudeau was contrived by PMO staffers" Do you recall...
= Yes

Q31. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: "RCMP source says 'security risk' against Trudeau was contrived by PMO staffers"

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q32. "Elections Canada attempts to combat huge number of non-Canadians on voting register"

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If *"Elections Canada attempts to combat huge number of non-Canadians on voting register"* Do you re... = Yes

Q33. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: *"Elections Canada attempts to combat huge number of non-Canadians on voting register"*

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q34. *"NDP Brampton-Centre candidate apologizes for offensive tweet from 2012"*

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If "NDP Brampton-Centre candidate apologizes for offensive tweet from 2012" Do you recall seeing t... = Yes

Q35. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: "NDP Brampton-Centre candidate apologizes for offensive tweet from 2012"

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q36. "Scheer won't say if Conservatives hired consultant to 'destroy' People's Party".

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If "Scheer won't say if Conservatives hired consultant to 'destroy' People's Party" Do you recall... =
Yes

Q37. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: "Scheer won't say if Conservatives hired consultant to 'destroy' People's Party"

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q38. "Edmonton Strathcona Green Party candidate drops out, asks supporters to vote NDP"

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If *"Edmonton Strathcona Green Party candidate drops out, asks supporters to vote NDP"* Do you recall... = Yes

Q39. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: *"Edmonton Strathcona Green Party candidate drops out, asks supporters to vote NDP"*

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q40. *"Trudeau's visit to Cuba – PM promises to provide financial aid to the country as US embargo discussions persist"*

Do you recall seeing this headline reported on any news media platform prior to the election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If *“Trudeau’s visit to Cuba – PM promises to provide financial aid to the country as US embargo disc...*
= Yes

Q41. At the time of the election, would your best guess have been that this statement was true?

The statement was: *“Trudeau’s visit to Cuba – PM promises to provide financial aid to the country as US embargo discussions persist”*

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not Sure (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q42. Thank you for your time in completing this survey. Do you wish to submit your survey responses?

- ☐ Yes, submit (1)
- ☐ No, please withdraw my data (0)

Appendix B.

Canada Proud Facebook Posts

Corruption Post 1

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization


Oct 17, 2019 · 🌐 · Next week, expect Justin Trudeau to sink to new lows and sleazy backroom deals in a desperate attempt to cling on as prime minister in a minority government. But Canadians shouldn't forget Justin Trudeau's double speak on who has the right to form government. · Trudeau's Double Speak

👍👎👏 1.9K

795 Comments



Corruption Post 2

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization


Sep 26, 2019 · 🌐 · Good. Canadians deserve answers about Justin Trudeau's rampant corruption.

canoe.com


Andrew Scheer promises Conservative government would launch inquiry into SNC-Lavalin

👍👎👏 2.8K

447 Comments



Corruption Post 3

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization


Oct 14, 2019 · 🌐 · Get ready for backroom deals to keep Trudeau and his corruption in power.

theglobeandmail.com

Andrew Scheer calls for majority to head off an anti-Conservative coalition

👍👎👏 2.5K

1.5K Comments



Corruption Post 4

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Oct 1, 2019 · 🌐 · Elections are tough, but they're tougher when you're a corrupt moron like Justin Trudeau. 🗣️ Watch as Trudeau just ignores a question he's incapable of answering. · Trudeau Blinks



 959

598 Comments


Veteran Post 1

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Oct 7, 2019 · 🌐 · NEW SURVEY: Justin Trudeau claims wounded veterans are asking for more than we can give. Do you agree? Let us know where you stand on these and other key election issues.


canadaproud.org
Canada Proud is under construction



 3.7K


2.3K Comments


Veteran Post 2

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

May 17, 2019 · 🌐 · The Liberals don't care about our armed force and sure don't care about our veterans.


hilltimes.com
'Veterans probably won't vote Liberal for a very long time': Norman case reflects Grits' failed promises to vets, say advocates



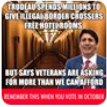
 410


149 Comments

Veteran Post 3

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization


Aug 7, 2019 · 🌐 · ...and done. Exhibit #1: Trudeau telling veterans they're asking for more than we can give while giving free hotel rooms to illegal border crossers.



 2.1K


559 Comments




Veteran Post 4

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Jun 6, 2019 · 🌐 · Remember when Trudeau said wounded veterans were asking for more than we could afford?


thepostmillennial.com
NATIONAL EMBARRASSMENT: Thousands of Canadian veterans are homeless



   2.4K


805 Comments




Global Affairs Post 1

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Oct 16, 2019 · 🌐 · How desperate is Trudeau? It seems he's calling in international favours.

thepostmillennial.com
Obama was wrong to endorse Trudeau; Trudeau was wrong to accept it - The Post Millennial



   2.4K

1.2K Comments

Global Affairs Post 2

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization


Oct 8, 2019 · 🌐 · FACT: If Justin Trudeau is somehow re-elected, his meetings with international leaders aren't going to make Canada look good. · Trudeau's Newest Fail




   1.7K




1.1K Comments

Global Affairs Post 3

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization


Oct 7, 2019 · 🌐 · Stop the international embarrassment.



   1.3K


251 Comments


Global Affairs Post 4

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Jun 9, 2019 · 🌐 · Yep, Justin Trudeau admitted he's the leader of a country actively committing genocide. This isn't going to end well.


thepostmillennial.com
Trudeau government supports international probe into allegations that Canada is committing genocide



 1.1K


798 Comments


Negative Affective Post 1

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 224K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Sep 28, 2019 · 🌐 · ISIS terrorists supported genocide and the mass rape of women and little girls. These monsters don't belong on Canadian streets, no matter what Justin Trudeau says.


cbc.ca
No regret: Captured ISIS fighter wants to come home — but not if he will be judged by Canadian law | CBC News




 3.8K


2.4K Comments

Negative Affective Post 2

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Sep 10, 2019 · 🌐 · Spoiled brats like Justin Trudeau will never understand what it's like growing up in the middle class. Trudeau inherited his wealth and never had to work for anything. Scheer's humble upbringing is nothing to be ashamed of – he should be proud of his roots.



 2K


440 Comments

Negative Affective Post 3

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Sep 25, 2019 · 🌐 · Trudeau says he's a Feminist, but he throws women who disagree with him under the bus.


thepostmillennial.com
Liberals allegedly removed MP because she didn't praise Trudeau enough




 576

























































230 Comments

Negative Affective Post 4

**Canada Proud** ✓
Page · 215K like this · Nonprofit Organization

Jul 26, 2019 · 🌐 · ...calling everyone who disagrees with him a racist and a bigot. This is what Liberals do when they can't win an argument.





1.5K

688 Comments

Appendix C.

Barack Obama Tweet

